Some Personal Musings on the Seven Competencies of Evolutionary Leadership
By Ken Homer

"The Earth "peoples" in the same way that an apple tree
"apples" or an orange tree "oranges."
~Alan Watts

To me Evolutionary Leadership (evoleadership) is an invitation to think more broadly and deeply about both our individual lives as well as humanity's role on Earth as *homo sapiens sapiens,* or twice knowing humans. Evoleadership is a stark reminder that through our ability to engineer the world around us, we have brought about the sixth mass extinction in history and placed ourselves on the endangered species list in the process. The evolutionary imperative we now face is to design our place in the world for a new and conscious purpose: millions of years of human flourishing – anything less is insufficient to our survival. As the competency of ontological design reminds us, that which we design also designs us – even if we are not aware of it. Our co-evolution with our tools is proving beyond doubt – for anyone who cares to open their eyes and examine the evidence – that continued devotion to an industrial paradigm with machine metaphors as the central organizing principles and processes for human activity on Earth now constitutes a threat to the existence of many forms of life – humans included.

In the 1980s I immersed myself deeply into the works of Bucky Fuller and, for a long time thereafter, I joined the ranks of "techno-optimists", fervently believing that human ingenuity could rescue us from the multiple messes we've placed ourselves in by willfully ignoring the unintended consequences of our material success. I am no longer in that camp. Irrefutable evidence now shows the extent to which we have damaged our life support systems, a.k.a., Earth's ecosystems. Even if we all woke up tomorrow as fully enlightened beings, the inertia in those systems will continue to wreak havoc for many decades before things will be turned around. The World Business Council for Sustainability's Vision 2050 project, which asked the questions, "Is it possible to create a sustainable world by 2050 and what would it take to do so?" can only offer a slim hope for humanity's flourishing – provided that we begin to make massive and unprecedented changes in the way we relate to our planet, each other and our ideas of what is meaningful and valuable.

Yet all is not lost, and, as Harland Cleveland observed, trends are not destiny. There are countless signs that people everyone are waking up and taking generative action. Our lives and our fates are embedded in complex emergent systems, and it is impossible to know how well, or how badly, things will go in the remainder of the 21st Century. Surely we can make a difference worth making if we put our minds to the task.

What follows are some of my initial thoughts on the seven competencies of Evoleadership. These musing will change over time as new information becomes integrated into my thinking. I want to be clear that nothing in this document is meant to be "the official party line" of the Evolutionary Leadership Community (ELC) or the Institute for Evolutionary Leadership (IEL). This is simply me riffing on the topic of evoleadership and hoping that reading it will stimulate you to likewise do some riffing of

your own – and share it with us – so that we can get a lively and informative learning conversation going. The more we can include diverse perspectives and hang out with the tensions that they produce in our thinking about evoleadership, the more likely we are to discover what works and what is truly useful as we explore the practices of evoleadership. The term "evolutionary leadership" was coined by Manuel Manga and has only been around for about a decade. The IEL and the ELC, are in their infancy. The unknowns far outnumber the knowns in this domain and we have much to learn – both with and from each other.

One way of arranging the competencies – there are many others
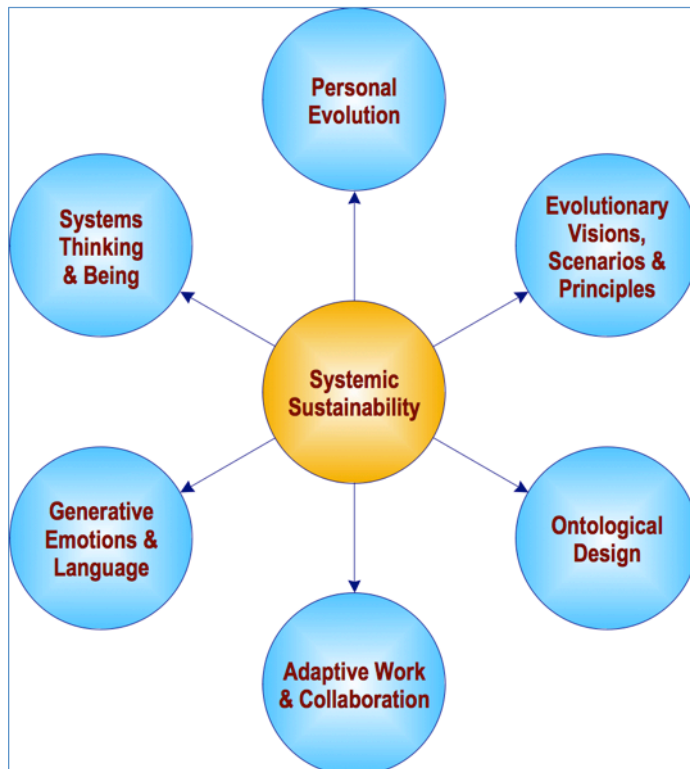
I'm not sure how the seven evoleader competencies differ from the eight pointed compass that you see on the IEL website. Seven can be nicely represented visually as six around one as you see here. I've arranged them as a set of complementary pairs. By that I mean that the work in one of the competencies is connected to and complemented by the competency that lies across from it on the other side of the circle. As you can see, Personal Evolution is paired with Adaptive Work and Collaboration. The more we develop our own ability to cope with complexity the easier it becomes to recognize when we are faced with adaptive challenges. That awareness makes it much easier to collaborate in finding ways to effectively cope with adaptive challenges. Systems Thinking and Being is paired with Ontological Design because, as we explore the nature of the systems we embedded within and co-creating, it becomes clear that we're indeed designing both consciously and unconsciously. Armed with a more robust systems perspective, we are better able to engage in ontological designing that will benefit all living systems so they can thrive and flourish. Evolutionary Visions, Scenarios and Principles gets paired with Generative Emotions and Language because, Evolutionary Visions, Scenarios and Principles are all expressed in, and communicated through language, and for them to be effective in moving people to action, that language must be aligned with living systems principles (generative), and motivating (emotions). Meanwhile Systemic Sustainability sits in the center as both the grounding and *raison d'être* for all of these competencies.

Personal Evolution

Wikipedia defines "evolution" as *"Change in the heritable traits of biological populations over successive generations."* By that definition, people don't evolve as individuals so much as they develop, both psychologically and socially. But it is through the personal development of millions of individuals that humanity has evolved over the millennia. The core of Personal Evolution is increasing our awareness of what constitutes being human. Personal evolution is the life-long practice of evolving our individual worldviews to encompass greater and greater diversity and complexity. There are numerous schools of thought espousing this idea, each of which has different names for the stages of developmental processes such as pre-conventional-, conventional-, and post-conventional-thinking, or ego-, ethno- and eco-identification among others. Some summarize it as the move from egosystem to ecosystem.

Personal evolution includes recognizing that the challenges we face as a species in the 21st Century are not going to be solved by the engineering mindset that so profoundly shaped the 20th Century. Evolutionary leaders work first on themselves, cultivating the fearlessness required to acknowledge, learn from, and move beyond the limitations of the conditioned responses and limiting beliefs we're all subject to that prevent us from seeing fully and clearly. We identify and cultivate our core strengths, and we practice asking appreciative questions to support the strengths of others. We focus on developing the requisite competencies of openness and learning, trust and reliability, ability to think in terms of systems, of flows and interactions over time, so that we can show up as the kind of leaders people want to follow. We work to develop new ecologically-based literacies of inclusion, collaboration, and design, that will allow us to steward ourselves and our planet toward a sustainable, just and flourishing world.

**Adaptive Work & Collaboration**

Ronald Heifitz and Donald Laurie assert that *"The single biggest failure of leadership is treating adaptive challenges as technical problems."* Heifitz and Laurie distinguish technical problems from adaptive challenges by the following six criteria:

Technical Problems	Adaptive Challenges
1. Easy to identify.	Hard to identify (easy to deny).
2. Lend themselves to quick and easy (cut & dried) solutions.	Require changes in values, beliefs, roles, relationships & approaches to work.
3. Often can be solved by an authority or expert.	People with the problem do the work of solving it.
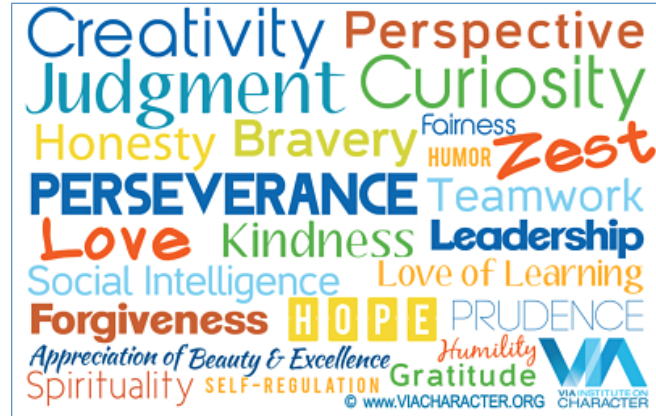
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4. Require change in just one or few places; often contained within organizational boundaries.	Require change in numerous places; usually they cross organizational boundaries.
5. People are generally receptive to technical solutions.	People are often resistant to even acknowledging adaptive challenges.
6. Solutions can be implemented quickly, often by edict.	"Solutions" require experiments and new discoveries, they can take a long time to implement.

List adapted from *The Work of Leadership* published in The Harvard Business Review, Jan/Feb 1997, by Ronald Hiefitz and Donald Laurie, *and Leadership on the Line,* by Ronald Hiefitz and Marty Linsky.

Evolutionary leaders acknowledge the complex nature of adaptive challenges, and, we recognize that we live in a *"nobody-in-charge"* world. That's why we cultivate seven different leadership competencies. We use a variety of strategies to help people to cope with what we see as our evolutionary imperative and the biggest adaptive challenge of them all: the creation of an ecologically sustainable, socially just and spiritually fulfilling world for as long as grass grows and rivers flow.

Systems Thinking & Systems Being
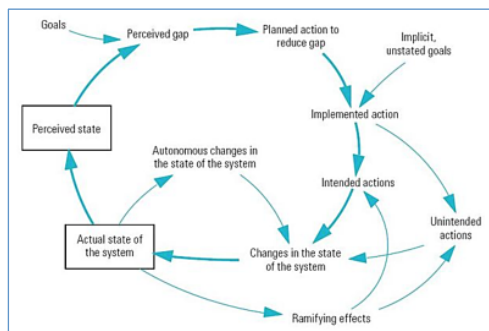
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Systems thinking is holistic by design. You are probably familiar with the casual loop diagrams that are core to systems thinking and systems mapping, and which make structures, processes, flows and hidden time delays visible, as well as mapping feedback loops and other system patterns or identifiers.

"Systems Being" asks us to recognize, identify, and operate in ways that harmonize with and benefit the larger systems in which we are embedded. Systems being is a different organizing paradigm for lived experience – see the Wendell Berry quote on the next page for an elegant phrasing of this concept. Systems being recognizes that if we keep treating the natural systems of which we are a part as something separate from us, then, in time, we will become separated from those systems through a process that 99.9% of all life which has ever existed on Earth has undergone: extinction.

Evolutionary leaders are betting that if we combine systems thinking with systems being, and add in the rest of the Evolutionary Leadership competencies, we stand a much better chance at joining the .1 percent of species that have beaten the evolutionary odds to date. When you pause to think about it, is there any other game in town?

Example of Systems Being Thinking:

"A bad solution is bad because it acts destructively upon the larger patterns in which it is contained... because it is formed in ignorance or disregard of them. A bad solution solves for a single purpose or goal, such as increased production. And it is typical of such solutions that they achieve stupendous increase in production at exorbitant biological and social costs... Good solutions recognize that they are part of a larger whole. They solve more than one problem and don't create new problems. A good solution should not enrich one person by the distress or impoverishment of another."
    ~Wendell Berry

Systems Being visualization

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Planetary_Boundaries_2015.svg

"The green areas represent human activities that are within safe margins, the yellow areas represent human activities that may or may not have exceeded safe margins, the red areas represent human activities that have exceeded safe margins, and the gray areas with red question marks represent human activities for which safe margins have not yet been determined." Description from Wikipedia.
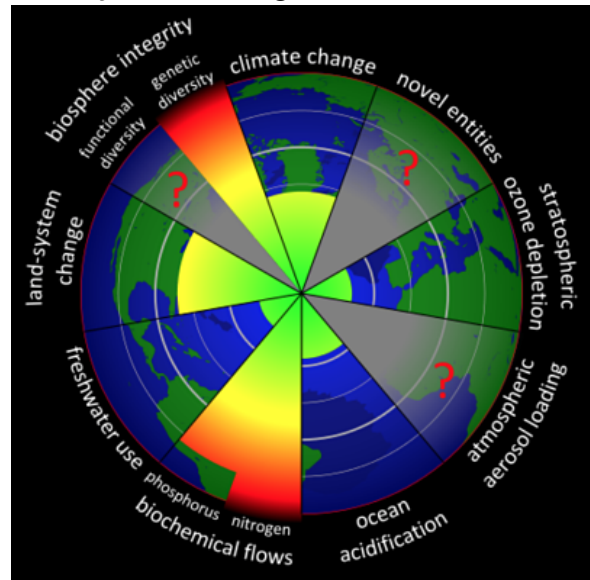
Ontological Design

Ontology is a fancy word for the study of the nature of being. Ontological design works a bit like a Mobius Strip. Evolutionary leaders know that people and planet are closely coupled – what affects one, also affects the other.
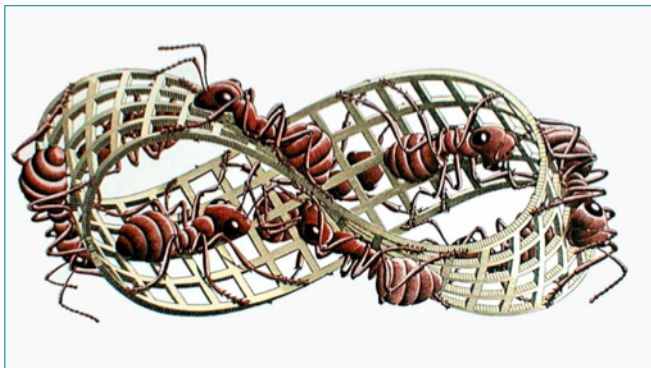
M. C.. Escher's Mobius Strip with Ants c.1963

"Human nature" is a very particular subset of "Earth Nature" – which we usually refer to simply as "nature." Over millions of years we have co-evolved with our planet – it has shaped us and we have shaped it. Now, however, human activity has entered into a phase where our impact on the planet is creating very rapid changes to our environment on the same scale that the natural processes of sun and wind and water took millennia to achieve. This is not be a bad thing per se, but as the Systems Being visualization at the top of the page reveals, the unintended consequences of our impact is producing some extremely challenging conditions that we are woefully unprepared to deal with. Some scientists have suggested that we have entered the "anthropocence" epoch. Whether this epoch will herald humanity's greatest achievement or our downfall is up to us.

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Ontological design recognizes that in addition to co-evolving with our planet, we also co-evolve with our tools and our cultures. That is, we shape our world and our cultures with our tools and technologies, and our tools and technologies in turn, shape our world, our cultures and ourselves. The ontological design challenge for evolutionary leaders is to invite people into the grand experiment of redesigning the human presence on Earth to ensure we are can thrive for millions of years to come. This offers a whole new level of mindfulness for aspiring leaders and would be designers of civilizations.

Generative Emotions & Language

The domain of emotions is rarely addressed in most organizations. After all, emotions are messy and unpredictable, and they are often at the root of conflict, which, you may have noticed, is something that most people prefer to avoid. Yet, emotions are what move us towards or away from people and possibilities. Emotions are always present, always exerting influence in our thinking and our relationships, and we ignore their influence at our peril. Doctor King did not proclaim, "I have an idea!" Ideas appeal to our minds, dreams to our hearts. Dr. King knew that to motivate people to risk their lives in the struggle for freedom and equality, he had to appeal to their intellect as well as their emotions.
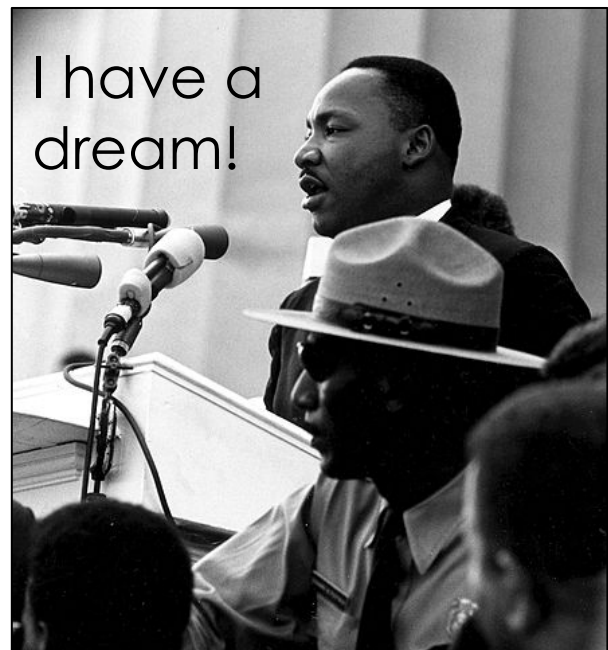
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Evolutionary Leaders are people who've developed the capacity and skill to work with emotions, even very powerful emotions. We know that emotionally laden messages are often used more to activate people's fears than to rouse the better angels of or nature. Evoleaders know that love – the ability to grant legitimacy to those whom we view as other – is the emotion that increases intelligence in people and societies. We use the generative emotions of care, kindness, compassion, and inclusion for creating purpose, clarity and focus among people in the service of bringing forth more enlivening futures. The Beatles had it partially right, we do need love, but love is not enough, we need vision, ingenuity, persistence, innovation, forgiveness, and acceptance that things will never go as we plan. For that reason, we need resilience, and a willingness to work through impossibly difficult challenges with no guarantee that we will succeed because if we do not complement love with all those things, our failure is assured.

Generative language is another way that Evolutionary Leaders work with challenge. Many people have pointed out that our current way of organizing our societies, cultures, and institutions is actually a form of "defuturing", meaning we're losing our ability to create a future where the world is welcoming and nurturing of human flourishing.

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"Just as the winged energy of delight carried you over many chasms early on, now, raise high the daringly imagined arch holding up the astounding bridges"

~ Rainer Maria Rilke

Image by Victoria Johnson, Creative Commons copyright:
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f2/Infinity_Bridge_in_Stockton.jpg

Although it's rarely recognized as a medium for life, we live in language the way fish live in water. Literally all work in the world involving more than one person can only be accomplished thanks to our ability to use language.

Generative language allows us to play with the boundaries of thought and potential instead of being trapped inside "the way things have always been", thereby opening up new domains of possibility for flourishing and thriving. At least one philosopher has recognized language as "The House of Being."

People make things happen through generative language. The conversation is the basic unit of human interaction, and it is through our conversations that we coordinate meaning, possibility, action and learning. The metaphors we use to organize our thinking, the words we use to convey what we understand, the conversations we engage in, all have tremendous impact on the kind of world that we create.

Which do you think will lead to a healthier future, the use machine metaphors in our language or the use living systems metaphors? A root cause of defuturing is due to our lack of understanding how the language we use everyday nourishes or denies life.

The rising dominance of the language of commerce, with its central metaphor of time being equal to money, has hollowed out our language to the point where what is valued about an old growth forest is not the beauty and life support functions that it provides to countless forms of life, but rather the number board feet of lumber the ancient trees contain, and how much money can be made by clear cutting it. If we keep living inside the language of commerce, defuturing will loom ever larger on our horizon.

Generative language gives birth to ideas and images of enlivening futures by connecting people to what is important to them and why they care about it. It also connects people to each other and to a set of future possibilities worth living into that are grounded in solid linguistic theory and practice. Generative language often shows up most powerfully in the form of provocative questions.

Image by Wade Davis: https://www.flickr.com/photos/planeta/7288841414
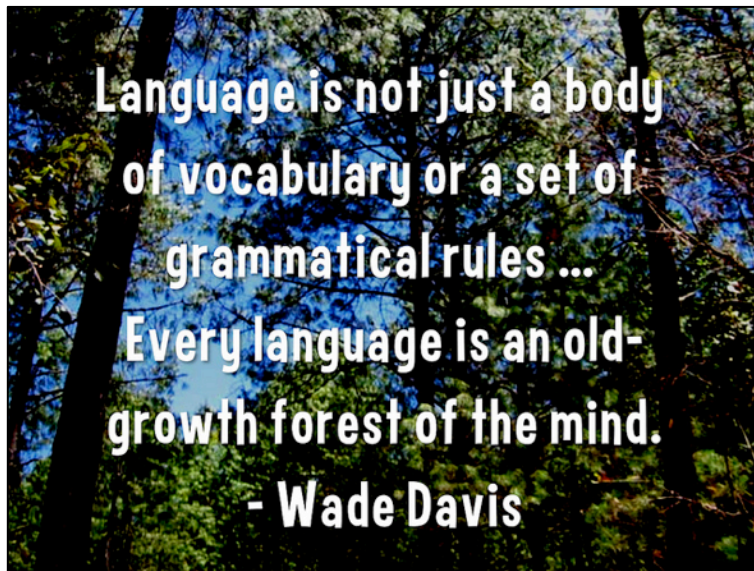
The example of an old growth forest above illustrates the kind of thinking that's engendered by habitually seeing the purpose of business as that of making money. What kind of value would an old growth forest have, if instead of seeing the purpose of business as making money, we saw the purpose of business as nourishing life? What if instead of focusing on the profits expected from next quarter's earnings, we were investing the profits from business to ensure that every single person has access to clean water, healthy food, a roof over their heads, and an education that allowed them to contribute to the well being of their community?

Evolutionary Visions, Scenarios, and Principles

The concept of an ordered, rational, predictable world, a concept that acted as the driving force and the central organizing principle for how we thought about and planned our collective future for much of the last 400 years, has all but disappeared from view. We now live in what is often referred to as a VUCA world. VUCA stands for Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and ambiguous.

Evolutionary visions are those that both propel us toward and pull us into enlivening futures. Because they need to be vast and sweeping and not bound by the

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dysfunction of today's prevailing ideologies, evolutionary visions can sometimes seem to be pie-in-the-sky pipe dreams that are nice to talk about, but really, come on, we have to take care of business here, and everybody knows you can't change human nature, so let's put this nonsense aside and get back to work.

However, evolutionary visions are not impossible dreams. Evolutionary visions connect people to the realm of imagination – and imagination is astonishingly generative.
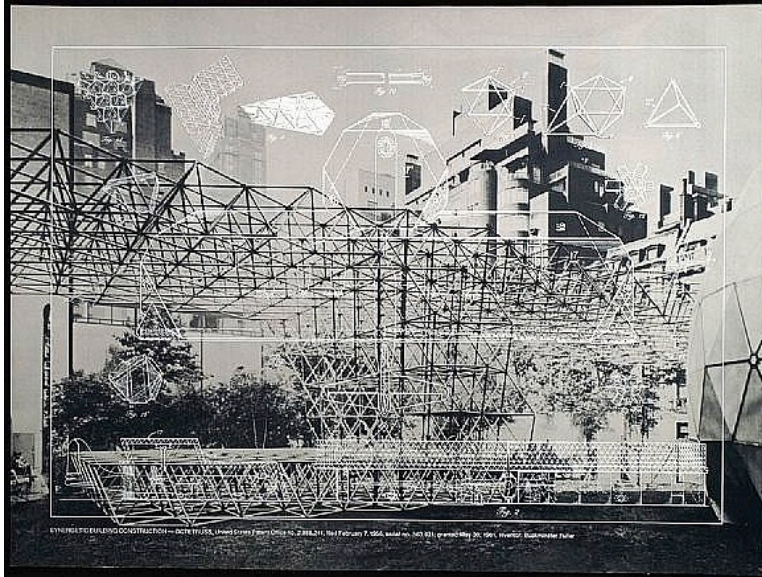
Drawing by Bucky Fuller, photo by Maia Valenzuela
https://www.flickr.com/photos/maiabee/4437620323

Imagination conjures visions of a world that works because evolutionary leaders know that compelling pictures of futures that work is part and parcel of the process whereby we can unlock new ways of thinking and dreaming that will become the foundation upon which the innovative structures that will change the world for the better will be built.

Evolutionary visions differ from mere fantasy because they tap into the deep maker instinct in each of us. The desire to make a better life courses through our veins along with our blood. An evolutionary perspective looks backwards as well as forwards. Evoleaders know that we have changed our world so profoundly, and so many times in the face of those who claimed that it could not be done, that we clearly see the both the need for, and the utility of, conjuring visions of a world that works for all. Evolutionary leaders are unabashedly optimistic about what's possible when we work together to bring about enlivening futures. At the same time we are thoroughly pragmatic about coping with the challenges of life in the present moment, of living in a time in which defuturing seems to be gaining ground everywhere you look. We never forget how much suffering exists in the world nor just how close to the edge we are at any given moment. We adopt practices to help us maintain our equilibrium and equanimity and to recover ourselves when the magnitude of what is required dwarfs anything we have offer.

Examples of evolutionary visions can be found throughout history: The Magna Carta, The Declaration of Independence, and The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Consider also the impact of visions from people like Steve Jobs, Aung San Suu Kyi, Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela or Malala Yousafzai have on our world.

Evolutionary leaders use the best tools available to explore scenarios to help us plot the most likely course for success We know the reality of tomorrow will be different from the visions we imagine today, but we're willing to fail magnificently in making those visions a reality. We know that in the absence of such visions the world of tomorrow is bleak indeed. We scour the world for knowledge and ideas and the wise application of both, to help us to cope with the incredible messiness of life. We are engaged in a continuous learning processes to "convert volatility to vision, uncertainty to understanding, complexity to clarity and ambiguity to agility" – a tip of the hat to Bob Johansen for this phrasing. See his book, *Leaders Make the Future* for more.

Systemic Sustainability

Systemic sustainability is perhaps the biggest BHAG (big hairy audacious goal) of them all. As Bucky Fuller pointed out, we need a design revolution. Evolutionary leaders seek innovative ways to address the question of how we bring all of our human designed systems and structures into an alignment with the living systems structures and principles that power our planet so that we can become a truly sustainable and flourishing planetary civilization.

> ***A story about systemic sustainability***
> *A hungry man walks down a street and passes a restaurant from which tantalizing aromas waft invitingly. His eye catches a sign in the window, "Come on in – all you can eat – your grandchildren will pay your bill."*
>
> *He enters hesitantly to find a room packed with the most marvelous foods from around the world. He is seated and told to help himself to the buffet tables heaped with delectable dishes. He makes three trips to the buffet, until finally, he can eat no more. He pushes back his chair and heads for the door.*
>
> *Suddenly he is stopped by the host and presented with a bill. "But, there is some misunderstanding," he protests. "The sign says my grandchildren will pay for this meal."*
>
> *"That is correct sir," says the host. "This is the bill for your grandparents."*

At this point, systemic sustainability, is in a stage akin to the tiniest sprouting of a Giant Sequoia. There are no guarantees that it will take root and flourish. It's the goal toward which all of the competencies of an evolutionary leader are applied even though we know it will take many lifetimes to complete. Systemic sustainability is what we work towards because we have borrowed this world from our grandchildren, and we want to ensure that they can pay for the meals we've enjoyed during our tenure here.

Earth from space and children playing are public domain images, Giant Sequoia taken by the author.