



# Our CoeurAge

Essays on ways our own courage can  
reshape a more sustainable future

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# Chapter 2: Awakening

## Ignorance is Not Bliss

*“Be serious. Be passionate. Wake up”*

- Susan Sontag

One afternoon when I was a young lad of about six, I crept into my mother’s art room while she was napping. There were many works-in-progress but there was one piece that was calling out for improvement. I did my best. The sky was not quite blue enough. As I smeared a brilliant azure paintbrush across the top I hit some tree tops, so I tried to wipe that off and replace the green. I had enough sense, even at my young age, to realize that the further I went, the worse it got. I snuck upstairs to the closet in my room, where I knew it was impossible for my mother to ever find me. When she rose from her bed to discover her enhanced work, she stomped upstairs to my room, flung the closet door open and found her youngest artist - with paint all over him. I spent a considerable time rationalizing my presence in the dark closet and vehemently denying what I did. I was hurt at the very suggestion I’d tampered with her painting, not-to-mention extremely frightened by my mothers’ psychic ability of finding me so quickly.

One way we get through our day is active denial. Despite all the evidence, we believe what we want to believe or what might be in our personal best interests. It is as natural as a child denying the

*“Common experience shows how much rarer is moral courage than physical bravery. A thousand men will march to the mouth of the cannon where one man will dare espouse an unpopular cause.”*

- Clarence Darrow

obvious while hiding in the closet. As adults we have more clever places to hide, like the corporations we work for, our status in the community, our positions of authority, or even God. I can rationalize or justify just about anything if I just know which closet to jump in to.

For those of us not denying truths, we numb out. A method of coping with difficult relationships, our diminishing personal wealth, longer work days, incivility in our neighbourhoods and on our highways, etc ... is to become comfortably numb (to paraphrase Pink Floyd). I used to be one of many jamming the freeways to shuffle along to toxic work environments for a boss I did not respect and with peers I did not trust, and turned off my value systems to accommodate my employers' needs while disregarding my own. I also knew those very organizations would discard me the moment technology or someone else "off-shore" could do what I did cheaper, or when the economic waves got too choppy. Numbing out is a natural survival technique, but as I found out the hard way, not a healthy long-term approach.

Author John Ralston Saul makes the point in his book *The Unconscious Civilization* that our conformist and corporatist society has taken "*the great leap backwards into unconsciousness ...to be relieved of personal, disinterested responsibility for society.*" We shrug off this inner emptiness as tolerable and acceptable, maybe even necessary. The collective nihilism that develops is a society more interested in the OJ Simpson trial than the hundreds of thousands being massacred in Rwanda. That nihilism also allows us to accept globalization without giving any thought to what child produced the shirt we just bought, or what impact the decisions we make to improve our quality of life for today will have on future generations.

To say it is a complex world we live in, would be a gross understatement. It is too easy for me to criticize others and take things out of context. To separate myself from being an ideologue or zealot with clay feet, I need to be continuously informed and aware – personally and systematically. I start this next chapter off with an essay of being aware of our contradictions – and we all have them. I then look at stories of unconscious civilizations I have visited, both ancient and modern, that were not paying enough attention to the long-term consequences of their behaviour. The short-term benefit that came from their "progress", ingenuity and avarice had grave long-term conse-

quences that are frightening to even imagine. One might be forgiving of the Mayan in *The Wisdom of Ants* as there was no precedence for their self-destruction, despite their sophisticated intelligence. And yet, how much more aware are we now as we seem to be repeating the same mistakes today? Surely we have learned since then. Then again, maybe not. Iceland is a *modern* saga of the cycle of that history, and just the beginning of what could come for the rest of us if we do not awaken to our pattern of self-destruction.

## Awakening to Our Contradictions

*“Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself,  
I am large, I contain multitudes.”*

- Walt Whitman

I have been tuned in to contradictions recently. They seem to be everywhere. For example, I saw an ad on a bulletin board announcing a gardening workshop on planting wildflowers. Er, how are they wild if we are planting them? I saw a bumper sticker on the back of a Chrysler that said “Lost your job yet? Buy a Foreign Car.” It was parked outside a “big box” store with a solid reputation of their stuff being made elsewhere. Good chance the gas in the car was foreign too. A few summers ago, my daughter Alannah and I traveled through British Columbia. One of our stops was the small idyllic village of Tofino. We returned home to discover Tofino had run out of water. Startling for any community but more so considering Tofino is in the middle of the rainforest. Running out of water in the rainforest is a disturbing contradiction.



After some honest deliberation, I realized I live with plenty of contradictions myself. My wife Ruth and I drive a Hybrid Toyota Prius. I am thinking of putting a bumper sticker on it that says “My other car is an SUV” because, well, it is. We just built an uber energy efficient and environmentally-friendly straw-bale home. In the back yard you will find our new electricity-gulping hot tub. Luckily, our new neighbours in Eden Mills, a small village that’s aiming to be the first carbon-neutral community in North America, are forgiving. They welcome us with wine, and bring along their bathing suits. We have a share in a bio-dynamic farm which provides not just organic, but local food. It tastes especially good with a bold Malbec from

Argentina. I eat good food because good health is important to me. So is bliss. Like, when I down a cold beer after a good run. Like, after a long day canoeing when I'm on a rock warmed by the late day sun beside a calm lake, smoking a cigar. Like, when I finish a tub of Coffee Haagen Daz before you can say "oh, did you want some?" Even my values contradict themselves! Health and Bliss debate daily. If there is something consistent with me, it's the fact I can contradict myself at any moment, like I just did in one sentence.

Corporations and lobby groups can be masters of spin and contradiction too. Clean Coal? I don't think so. How about that tired ol' chestnut "Our people are our biggest asset" -- that is, until we discard them like used kleenex when we catch a fiscal cold. Laying off people and cutting "discretionary" spending (like training and development) is the first thing to happen in every recession. I take little comfort with history repeating itself. In good times, we will defend the virtues of capitalism and the survival of the fittest. It seems though when the economic waves get too choppy we are quick to plead for new credit to the government, that institution that is there to impose regulations. Free market capitalism has become a contradiction.

I run a company. I could have used a bail-out. Unlike the car companies, our customers were actually delighted with our work. Alas, many of them suspended using our services because their customers had stopped buying *their* products or services. And so on. And even if they are recession proof, their budgets were slashed until some collective sanity returned. Apparently, it is bad 'optics' when you develop the people you haven't axed. I get it. Well, actually I don't but I could either be bitter and shake my fist at the world, or I can be comfortable with the contradiction of corporations *not* investing in their people or having facilitated dialogue to meet the challenges of the day – at the time they need it the most. Here's the rub: just because I know life is complicated and contradictions exist, does not mean I have to take comfort in them.

Fully acknowledging the complexities and vagaries of daily life, I know part of my work is to face them and work out that tension to overcome quandaries. It is a process that leads to innovation. Roger Martin, Dean of the Rotman School of Management writes in his book *The Opposable Mind*, “We were born with an opposable mind we can use to hold two conflicting ideas in constructive tension. We can use that tension to think our way through to a new and superior idea.” What I am really advocating is for us to keep aware of what is happening, not turning away from the destructive patterns that we can avoid, drawing upon our courage to innovate or at least attempt alternative measures that bring more honour to our “most important assets” and our environment.

While bail-outs may pacify us in the short-term, innovation is the balm for the long-term. Begin by forgetting everything you “know” or think you know. I am not suggesting “unlearning” is easy as our challenges are immense and will be more profound as the days pass. All the more reason to seriously examine *alternatives* to make our way through them - in courage.

**What contradictions exist in your life?**

**Which are worthy of elimination? Which would be good to minimize or is it OK to have them?**

**When have you found something you've held as an 'absolute truth', to be contradicted by another 'absolute truth'?**

## The Wisdom of Ants

*“It takes intelligence to solve problems,  
but it takes wisdom to prevent them”*

- Albert Einstein

My daughter Erica and I were sitting on the porch of our cabaña in Mexico playing cards. It was a beautiful evening with a warm soft breeze and a full moon tucked under a palm tree. As I began shuffling the cards, Erica yelled out so loud, the dogs from the Mayan village we were staying in started responding in kind. She pointed to a big boulder at our feet. At first glance it appeared to be moving, but after a few moments of refocusing and closer examination, we realized that thousands of ants had decided to go for an evening stroll.



After the immediate revulsion had passed, it quickly became mesmerizing to watch as thousands of ants that suddenly appeared on the rock in a random and chaotic way, in no time self-organized into distinct streams that made their way to some place left to our imaginations. It was intriguing how quickly they assembled to get to where they needed to go. Are ants really that smart? According to E.O. Wilson’s study of ants in *Anthill*, despite their ability to rapidly self-organize, when they become a “super-colony”, they are less concerned about social boundaries and instead attempt to dominate each other, all at the expense of sustaining the colony. That does not sound too wise. Are we any wiser?

James Surowiecki’s popular book *The Wisdom of Crowds* makes the case that we are indeed smarter in groups than the smartest individual. He illustrates simply that if one person, a very intelligent one, had to guess the number of jelly beans in a jar, chances are that person

would not have as accurate an answer as the average of a “crowd” of people making the same guess. He makes the point that collective wisdom, if harnessed properly, is more reliable than one person, even when the problem to solve is more complex than the number of jelly beans in a jar.

This makes sense. It is called collaboration. As is often the case though, a concept that seems so simple is, in reality, very difficult to manifest in organizations. There are conditions Surowiecki outlines in order for crowds to be wise. They must have:

1. **DIVERSITY** – a group with different points of view, talents and a culture that supports those views (leaders willing to be challenged) will make better decisions.
2. **INDEPENDENCE** – people’s opinions are their own and not influenced by those around them (people willing to speak out).
3. **DECENTRALIZATION** – power to make decisions is given to individuals based on local or specific knowledge rather than “head office” (empowerment).
4. **AGGREGATION** – a self-governing methodology or systemic way of determining what the group is saying or decision it is making (rigour).

So does this describe your organization? If we are honest, we know that when highly developed individuals come together in a traditional organizational hierarchy, they often function at a lower level.

Thomas Homer-Dixon argues in his book *The Upside of Down* that, in reality, crowds are *not* as smart as individuals – he calls it *negative emergence*. There is plenty of evidence to support negative emergence, from our choice of political leaders based on empty promises to the decisions of what we buy – much of which we really do not need, from angry mobs to collapsed civilizations, from environmental degradation to climate change. Individually, we wonder why everyone else doesn’t get it.

Thanks in large part to the massive popularity of Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*, many people are realizing the potential impact of climate change. Individually we are aware and concerned, so why do emissions keep rising? Negative emergence! A recent poll told us that most people do not believe they *personally* can do anything about emissions, and they look to our highly centralized government and corporations to solve the problem. Rather than taking the independent, individual actions that together add up to "the wisdom of crowds" that Surowiecki articulates, we prefer to wait for our leaders to show us the way. Separate polls suggest we give high marks to leaders with the courage of their convictions. We are not so concerned if their decisions are good ones, as long as our leaders are decisive. The "un-wise crowd" that we are conceding our power, thinking we can shift our responsibility to our leaders. We'll support what they decide – as long as it doesn't cost us more at the pumps or to heat our homes.

In contrast, it is the courage in individuals who break from an "un-wise crowd" and take personal responsibility that would signal the beginning of positive emergence - when the crowd, or ant colony, truly does become wise. Despite what we might wish, governments follow what the crowd wants – which should provide all the incentive we need to "wise up" by drawing on our diversity, our independent thinking, our local knowledge. Nowhere is this more needed than in corporations where huge opportunities abound.

By the title of his book Homer-Dixon implies that, though a collapse of some kind is inevitable, there is also hope. He speaks of a *cata-genesis*, a *new birth* of creativity that will form from the impending *cata-strophe*. Signs of this are emerging. Mass-collaboration like open-source operating systems (Linux) to rival the behemoth of Windows and on-line encyclopedias and collaborative work spaces (Wiki) are two examples of how crowds can be wise. Indeed, Don Tapscott's book *Wikinomics* is suggesting the birth of a new economic order from the collapse of the industrial age mindset of the past.

Despite these signs of hope, Homer-Dixon still believes we are headed towards a crisis because history has shown us repeatedly that we tend to see the trouble we're in only when it's too late. Examples abound but one right in front of me is the Mayan civilization.



As Erica and I continued our Mexican holiday, we visited the sites of many historic Mayan ruins. Their structures were truly magnificent, but their mastery of time and their calendar was their greatest achievement. Cortes landed in 1518 to begin the conquest, but the Mayans

had predicted 500 years *before* he landed in Mexico that 1518 was when the Bolopumi (The Long Night) would begin. Peter Senge shares in his book *Presence* that the Bolopumi is the cycle in the Mayan calendar that is a “period of darkness, when materialism would take root among the peoples of the world and when people’s hearts would become cold.” It lasts nine cycles of fifty-two years - that takes us to ... you guessed it ... 2001. From this time, we have “the opportunity to create a new world but this [new era] would be born among great chaos and upheaval.” Sounds like a cata-genesis to me!

Our individual and the collective intelligence of humanity have surely evolved since the Mayans but, are we any wiser? Our quick-and-easy consumer society, 90-day attention-span “fast companies”, and four year (sort of) democracies support an unsustainable short term view. Even the Mayans could not sustain their civilization despite a very long term view and an incredibly sophisticated intelligence. Well, at least as smart as those ants.

**Do you value intelligence over wisdom?**

**What is the difference?**

**What steps will you take to create, or be part of, a wise crowd?**

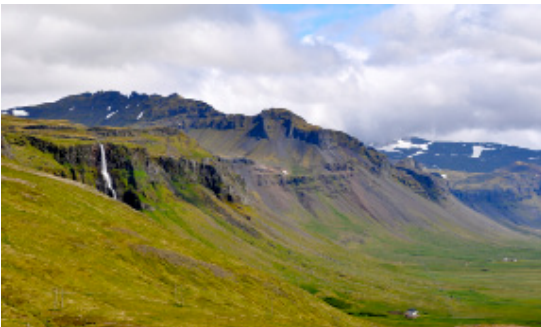
**What would it take to prevent negative emergence in your world?**

## The Viking Economy Saga

*“The love of freedom and independence has always been a characteristic of the Icelandic people. Iceland was originally colonized by free-born chieftains who would rather live and die in isolation than serve a foreign king.”*

- Halldór Laxness, Nobel Laureate and iconic Icelandic author

It is not difficult to imagine when GM and Chrysler are being driven to bankruptcy and AIG and Lehman Brothers can no longer be banked on, that the impact on economies would be staggering. But what happens when an entire nation goes suddenly bankrupt? Such is the sad case in Iceland, a rugged island pressed up against the Arctic Circle. Iceland is a tiny nation with a population of just over 300,000, about half of which resides in its capital Reykjavik. Just before its collapse, this country of farmers and fishermen was considered the wealthiest country per capita in Europe, even though their economy was about one-tenth the size of Google’s net worth.



It is easy to brush off the collapse of a tiny economy of a no-mans-land in the middle of nowhere. Who really cares? Well I do, enough to visit it and find out more about this quirky place. If an economy can collapse there, why not here? Taking the red-eye from Toronto, my

wife and I arrived in Reykjavik at 6 a.m., without sleeping a wink. As insomniacs, we knew there was a good chance this would happen so we’d planned on arriving early at the apartment we rented to catch a few zees before hitting the town. It was a beautiful sunny June day though and I was reticent to spend time napping, so in our sleep-deprived state we went straight to Plan B – rent a car and drive

all day to where Jules Verne found his inspiration for *A Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, the Snæfellsnes peninsula. Though I could hardly endorse such a reckless decision, an inescapable truth is, bearing witness to breathtaking landscapes is powerful stimulant.

Even though this is like no other place I've visited, Iceland's history and recent events exhibit some familiar patterns. Much like Easter Island, early settlers deforested Iceland. The superior sailing skills in the Viking Age, however, made it relatively easy to sail to neighboring islands to plunder and kill anyone in their wake. The difference between other European 'explorers' and the Vikings however, is they generally didn't stick around. They simply took what they needed and moved on. Their marauding lifestyle eventually abated but it seemed to instill a culture of recklessness that carried forward to the current economic crisis.

Iceland's Viking history is a bit ironic considering Þingvellir, a stop along the popular Golden Circle drive, lays claim to the birthplace of the democratic system of government. The present-day parliament is a modest two storey stone edifice that would look like a small house in Rosedale or Westmount. The bouncers at the pubs are more imposing than the security guard at the door. Apparently, the Prime Minister of the oldest parliament in Europe is very accessible. Simply walk in and make an appointment with her.

There are no slums here, and I saw little evidence of excess. Going back as recently to the late eighties, there was no day-time television and you would be hard pressed to find a beer. It is no wonder the country currently has one of the highest literacy rates in the world.

Iceland has an absurd per capita ratio of authors and poets. The first stories written in narrative prose, the medieval Icelandic Sagas, foreshadowed the literature of the modern world but they were written by Icelanders for Icelanders. They were, and perhaps still are, the very essence of how Iceland created and sustained itself.

One of the last places settled on Earth and the youngest country in Europe speaks the oldest living language. Icelandic is not a dying language as *everyone* here speaks it. They also all speak English. It turns out, a country with multilingual, well-read and intelligent citizens also makes for a safe place to live. The crime rate is almost non-existent—the most heinous crime being disorderly conduct. To give you a better idea, this is a place where criminals get to go home for the holidays.

Aside from their literary and linguistic accomplishments, Iceland was not always a cultural fun spot. Hotels and restaurants were not abundant, nor appealing, and then there's this matter of 24-hour darkness for months on end. But something magical happened in the 90s when enough people discovered that there was 24-hour daylight in the summer. High fashion, swanky restaurants, funky artists, and a night-life of hedonistic debauchery that makes New York look like Boise, quickly made Iceland the place to be. Their economy was scorching. Iceland was hot.

But now ... it's not. As it was elsewhere, the wealth everyone was enjoying was built on massive credit – the salvation of any economy (and household) running out of steam, even in a place where the steam is literally pushing through the earth. When reality came crashing down, it quickly became a modern and tragic saga.



The peaks and valleys of Icelandic well-being match the ineffable landscape of fjords and lava fields. Massive waterfalls everywhere, miles of

a moss-carpeted volcanic lava field leading to Jökulsárlón, a glacial lagoon where aqua blue sculptures of glacial ice branching from the

world's largest ice cap outside the Poles (Vatnajökull) gets trapped until it escapes to the ocean, all make Iceland an obvious place of otherworldly extremes.

The North American tectonic plate and the Eurasian plate rip right through the middle of the country and generate regular earthquakes. Iceland has the largest glacier in Europe and its many volcanoes are still very active – two of the top ten largest eruptions in world history happened here. When an eruption happens under a glacier it creates a meltdown that is unfathomably destructive. Everything in its path gets washed away to sea, and what remains are miles of black lifeless sand and rocks that stand out against the diverse colours of land and sea. The fiscal meltdown that happened here in 2008 was no different.



The combination of a highly deregulated financial system, a giddy participation in the global casino of currency exchange and a central bank asleep at the switch resulted in all three national banks collapsing, leaving a foreign debt of \$60 billion in a country with a GDP of \$20 billion. While the massive U.S. economy can absorb big blows, at least for a while, the economy here was so small that their irrational exuberance had little to oppose it. Vikings do not have safety nets. When the value of your currency falls 30%, the central bank rate rises to 18%, unemployment goes from 1% to 15% and the economy is predicted to fall 9.6%, safety nets are handy to have around.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has come marching to the rescue by extending the repayment of debts and the requirement of paying only the interest for the next seven years. Realizing the principal is still there to be paid after seven years is not sitting so well with

the majority who have lived their lives within their means. Besides, having so much independence within their collective soul, help is a very tough pill to swallow. The IMF is the foreign king Laxness refers to in the quote above, that future generations will have to serve. Icelanders are faced with a reckoning that is leaving a horrible taste in their mouth. Should we presume that we are exempt from such a reckoning?

While most other Western economies are significantly deeper and Canada is looking relatively good from the crisis only because of its highly regulated banking system, I see little difference from the ‘deal’ Iceland struck that creates a massive debt to the massive deficits we and other G8 countries are building to ‘stimulate’ our economies.



We are using the problem that got us all in the mess we are in, as the solution. In the end, future generations will be paying for our unsustainable ways.

In 2006, the United Nations rated Iceland the best country in the world to live and the fourth ‘happiest’ country. But as the most over-used line in travel literature states, Iceland is a place of contrasts – a land of fire and ice; reckless Vikings and a woman prime minister who is the first openly gay head-of-state; a party town that is really quite angry; a visionary country that proclaims it will be off fossil fuels by 2050 and a land of shortsighted greed that got so many in trouble.

My hope rests with Johann, a fellow I met at the Karamba bar on the main strip. He said, “I hope that this crisis will teach Icelandic people what happiness truly means. This will bring back old Iceland, where family and friends in the close-knit society were more important than coins and papers.”

Icelanders like Johann who have real jobs are left holding the bag of debt that the few beneficiaries who pushed money around created. In Iceland, everyone knows the names of those responsible for the downfall and be assured - they have left town. The ‘exit plan’ of the white-collar criminals who benefited from Iceland’s demise was consistent with that of their Viking predecessors, and when they are brought to justice, my guess is, they won’t be going home for the holidays.

## How can we prevent a “meltdown” in our lives?

**Frances Westley says Social Innovation is the third leg that links resilience and vulnerability. What change can you create that builds your resiliency, and reduces your vulnerability?**

*“And Ingolfur Arnarson stood up again and again and, puffing his chest and flourishing his hands with inimitable artistry, pointed to his opponent and proved conclusively and beyond a doubt that it was he who was directly responsible for the enormous losses incurred by the banks, which had allowed speculators to squander the savings of a whole nation, for the financial scandals that had brought the fishing companies into such widespread disrepute ... And now that the peasantry had united to defend their rights and to secure improved conditions, this man had risen up against them with the foul intention of dragging into the mire the very class that had borne the nation on its shoulders through fire and ice and pestilence for a thousand years, preserving its culture intact through numberless perils.”*

- Halldór Laxness, *Independent People* - written in 1946