A CENTURY OF EXTREMES

By Rod Matthews

The 21st Century is an extraordinary time – a century of extremes. We can create much grander civilisations or we could trigger a new Dark Age.

James Martin[i]

As humans and the civilisations we have created have evolved, the decision to act or not to act has had ramifications for increasing numbers of people. In the Rift Valley of Africa between one and two million years ago, decisions would affect a family or tribe. At the beginning of the Common Era, such a decision would have implications for up to a million people (the believed population of the city of Rome at its peak). Today, a decision to act or not to act on certain issues could threaten all civilisations, the actual existence of human beings, and perhaps even the existence of life on the planet.

To understand James Martin's comment there are perhaps four areas we should explore:
- The challenges we face
- The possible solutions
- What might help us overcome the challenges
- What might hinder us in overcoming the challenges

Let's look at these one at a time.

The challenges we face:

- **Resourcing.**
  Resourcing issues centre on the location, ownership, extraction, consumption and by-products of resources. Resources include everything humans require to lead the lives we have made for ourselves – from air, water and food, through to energy production, and into the production, transport and consumption of consumer goods.

- **Climate.**
  As we take millions of years' worth of carbon atoms from the earth's crust and release them into the atmosphere, we trigger feedback events like the warming of the oceans and the shrinking of arable lands. These events conspire in an exponential way to increase the speed and severity of changes to the climate.

- **Pandemics.**
  Highly mobile populations, a reduction in physical living space and an increased use of antibiotics, detergents and antiseptics create the perfect storm for pandemics. AIDS, bird flu and SARS are recent examples.

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- **Population.**
  Feeding, housing, educating, employing and satisfying a world population of 7 billion (expected to be 9 billion by 2050) is both causing and magnifying the abovementioned issues. The growth of mega-cities populated by huge numbers of underclass living in squalor and yet within spitting distance of wealth and privilege is a slippery slope to, at best, revolution, and at worst, anarchy.

- **Thinking.**
  At its extremes, lazy, indoctrinated or uneducated thinking is both directly and indirectly responsible for the rise of religious fundamentalism, political extremism and simplistic popular policies and actions. Just because something is popular doesn't mean it is good.

The possible solutions:

Of course there is no one solution. Overcoming the challenges noted above will require major shifts in each of the following areas.

- **Education.**
  Solutions will come from educating women in third world nations; increasing the will of the media to educate; increasing the education of people who have access to the resources required to solve these solutions; and educating the public to understand the challenges, identify and then implement the solutions.

- **Technology.**
  Solutions will also come from advances in the application of science and creativity in the areas of food, communications, transport, health and medicine, security and energy. Access to information through communications technology is both an education and a technology solution. It can be argued that this played a large role in the Arab Spring. It could also lead to a revisiting of Victorian virtues and ethics.

- **Law.**
  Part of the solution to poverty, poor education, pandemics, climate and resourcing will come from the passing and policing of international laws.

- **People.**
  There are many examples in history of people operating with a common purpose to create lasting and meaningful change. Kony 2012 is a recent example of a grassroots movement that has raised awareness of a particular issue.

- **China.**
  China is cashed-up, it has a culture of long-termism, a powerful central government and a massive workforce. 'Here lies a sleeping giant … when he wakes he will shake the world.' (Attributed to Napoleon)

What might help us overcome the challenges:

- **Evolution.**
  It is the nature of evolution to evolve out of a crisis. There is a wonderful quote from the film *The Day the Earth Stood Still*: 'Only at the precipice do we evolve.'

- **Curiosity.**
  When we see the environment as being primarily safe we become curious and playful. This curiosity and playfulness is the precursor to ingenuity.

- **Track Record.**
  Our brain size and history give us an unprecedented track record of solving problems.

- **Momentum.**
  Momentum = mass x *velocity*. With the advent of the communications revolution, issues are able to gain a mass and a velocity that was only a dream as little as 50 years ago. The challenge will be to create the momentum around the greatest points of leverage.

What might hinder us in overcoming the challenges:

- **Momentum.**
  Momentum is a double-edged sword. Momentum is what kills you in a car crash. Momentum is the difference between losing $100 and your life savings in a stock market crash. Today, momentum could be said to be on the side of problems rather than solutions.

- **Greed and corruption.**
  In our post-enlightenment secular society it is easy to be critical of the corruption and greed of religions and their institutions. But history would suggest that corruption and greed have been the hallmarks of the pre-eminent organisation of the day. There was a time when the pre-eminent organisation was the city; this then became religions, then the state, and now a perhaps the corporation. The common denominator here is that power corrupts people, and pre-eminent organisations of the day are made of groups of people.

- **Bureaucracy and vested interests.**
  Solutions might come from the policy elite or from the invisible hand of the free market. Either way they each have their own challenges. The policy elite will need to be careful that they do not strangle the solutions in red tape, while the free market will need to recognise that just because something is popular, cheap or convenient doesn't mean it is the answer.

- **Loss aversion.**
  In his book *Hardwired Humans – Successful Leadership Using Human Instincts[ii]*, Andrew O'Keeffe writes: 'There is a saying that people resist change. While this might be conventional wisdom, it just isn't true. If Humans were hardwired to resist change we'd still be living in caves.' Andrew goes on to explain that what people resist is *loss*, not change. If we are to deal with the problems we face, we will either need to challenge our human instincts or make what is good, cheap, and what is bad, expensive. We will also need to provide solutions that allow people to improve their lifestyles while improving the planet at the same time. As a result, movements encouraging people towards eco-communalism will not be a large contributor to the solution.

- **Overwhelm.**
  Ennui can be defined as a feeling of world-weariness and listlessness that comes from feeling overwhelmed. A major challenge that we face today is the 'noise' that is created by the communications revolution. It seems as though there are too many problems, too much information and too many possible solutions to consider. The information and solutions become even more difficult to sort through as everyone involved claims that the science backs up their position. Science is the new God and God is on our side.

- **Lazy thinking.**
  Not everyone cares as much as you and I, which means that many people spend their time doing other things rather than reading nerdy articles like this. The media know this and as a result we are on the receiving end of a media that is increasingly sensationalist and lacks any depth of analysis. This means that people who consume this media (and have other stuff to get on with in their lives) only hear very small fragments of complex issues. This is why it is not uncommon to hear people I know and love regurgitate poorly thought-through positions on topical issues. One of my favourite phrases comes from a hero of mine, Ben Goldacre, who is a well-known science writer and can often be heard saying, 'I think you'll find it's a little more complex than that.' [iii]

- **The black swan.**
  In his book *The Black Swan* [iv], Nassim Nicholas Taleb talks about how, before the discovery of Australia, all swans were white. And yet when Australia was explored there was a black swan – impossible to conceive and yet alive and well. Taleb uses this metaphor to explain how we cannot predict the future with anything better than chance. You cannot predict the black swan. There will no doubt be things that happen between now and the implementation of our solutions that we cannot foresee.

So in many respects the stage is set, as it always has been, for a battle between our own ingenuity, our own folly, and sheer blind evolutionary luck. The difference this time is perhaps that the stakes are bigger than ever before.

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[i] www.jamesmartin.com

[ii] O'Keeffe, Andrew (2011), *Hardwired Humans – Successful Leadership Using Human Instincts*. Roundtable Press; Sydney, Australia.

[iii] Goldacre, Ben (2009), *Bad Science*. Fourth Estate; Great Britain.

[iv] Taleb, Nicholas Nassim (2008), *The Black Swan – The Impact of the Highly Improbable*. Penguin Books; London, England.

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