

Never Been Better, Never Felt Worse

Robb Smith,
CEO, Integral Life
www.integrallife.com
[@robbsmith](https://twitter.com/robbsmith)

Human life has never, in all of history, been better than it is right now. And yet for many of us, it's never felt worse. This is the puzzle I'd like to explore this morning, because I think the puzzle itself is a clue to its own solution, with transitions between eras always having one foot in the promise of a future that is just beginning to dawn, and one foot in the past that is painfully struggling to hold on to what is safe and known. I believe that this is what the inside of Green society feels like at its peak, with a trailing Orange society behind and within us, and transcendence to a Teal society beginning to emerge at the leading edge.

We're wracked by rapidly-deteriorating social cohesion and the rise of populism, which under the global leadership of Donald Trump is laying down an assault on the values and norms of the post-Enlightenment, liberal democratic order. Populism itself, whether that of 1830, 1848 or 1892, and similar to the rise of fascism in the 1930s, is a social reply to a particular modern dysfunction in a national social holon, and that is political inflexibility combined with racial resentment and economic despair for a segment of a democratic population.

If you read my essay [The Great Release](#), you'll know I think today's upheaval is evidence of a broader cyclical breakdown, the phase in a complex system's overall growth cycle when political stagnation and resource-hoarding become so severe that the system is forced to reorganize in order to prepare for the next stage of growth. The great recession of 2008 was a definitive collapse, and there are likely more ahead.

Our current macro-cycle, which I see starting with the rise of the US-led world order after 1945, is now faltering in the face of cultural and economic stagnation in the US and elsewhere, and in 2016 saw the US effectively renounce its global leadership. In the face of this vacuum, we see the possibility of a bipolar world for the first time since the 1980s, but this time with US and China as cooperating-competitors in establishing the moral, economic, technological and social development path for the 21st century.

But what might this path look like? That is my real purpose here.

And today I'll go even further than I did in my essay: the great release, this systemic breakdown, is ushering in the dawn of a Teal, integrative planetary operating system, the breakdown itself making room for a significant reorganization of the current operating system in order to accommodate humanity's momentous leap into the Transformation Age.

The operating system of an era

So let's start there. What do I mean by operating system?

I think integral metatheory shines here: we can see that it is a four-quadrant confluence of bio-psycho-socio-cultural emergences at the leading edge, a leading edge that moves over time from the progressive margin to eventually become the dominant mode of global human life of that era. What's emerging today amongst the progressive, wealthy and highly-educated could be the dominant mode of life 30 years from now. As William Gibson so aptly noted, "The future is already here — it's just not very evenly distributed."

In the terms of panarchy, which I suggest will be the global governance model of Teal, new levels emerge anytime the existing level passes a threshold beyond which it can no longer adequately organize and sustain existing structures. Deep inside civilization... social, technological, cultural and philosophical potential is accumulating, creativity and innovation are being

stored, significant complexity and differentiation are building up, and at some point a threshold is crossed that forces a new level to emerge, a new operating system to come into being that can make sense of and organize the latent potential in civilization.

This is where we are today, and it shouldn't confuse us that all of these transitions are marked by a massive collapse of some sort, a great release of the system as it makes way for the new.

Let's look at the past few hundred years to illustrate.

The Orange operating system was the leading edge in the 18th century, at which time we see the simultaneous emergence of new philosophy (from John Locke to Adam Smith to David Ricardo), new technology (the enabling technologies of the industrial revolution), new values (liberty, property, reason, self-determination) and new forms of governance (exemplified by the US Constitution and tri-partate government).

This operating system transcended but still included much of the Renaissance-mercantilism that it succeeded. And for nearly two hundred years Orange led the way as the model operating system, even when it resorted to violence to expunge the diseases of prior operating systems, as it did with slavery in the United States in 1863 and Brazil by 1888.

By 1950, when a new, Green operating system had just begun to emerge, Orange had been at its apex for decades.

Remarkably, within a few decades on either side of 1950, we see the outlines of this new, leading-edge Green operating system begin to take shape: The simultaneous emergence of new philosophy (from Ludwig Wittgenstein to Jacques Derrida), science (Einsteinian relativity and quantum mechanics), technology (the transistor and television), values (subjectivity, social justice,

aperspectivalism) and new forms of network-centered governance (United Nations, social security, Medicare).

Not coincidentally, major wars mark the transition into Orange, and also into Green. Historically it's fairly clear that both world wars were symptoms of the increasing rigidity and irresilience of the world system brought about by failures of 19th century industrialism, imperialism, monetary policy and failed social accommodation.

That is, to say it clearly, the world wars were the final gasp and devastating climax of a rigid Orange world order no longer capable of accommodating the social, economic, technological and political tensions that had built up within it and could not be resolved from within Orange itself. Every operating system, and every stage of holonic growth, contains within it tensions and contradictions which over time reveal themselves as inherent evolutionary limits. The world wars paved the way for a reorganized Green operating system to emerge in their wake, and like Orange before it, Green gradually came to transcend and include much of what it succeeded.

Today, 7 decades later, we find Green at or near an apex, and the interplay between the trailing powers of Orange and the newly-emerging leading edge of Teal since 2007 represents the central drama of our time.

In short, it is the heart of the great release, the signal of a momentous leap.

Let's take a brief tour of what the operating system of an era includes.

The operating system of an era is defined by the primary emergent values that can come online only when the scarcity of the prior era is satisfied: that is, the scarcity that served as the organizing principle the operating system was most centrally evolved to solve. Our transition is occurring because the trailing scarcity of Orange—market-oriented, material wealth optimization—has been satisfied at the leading edge. Arising to replace it in

its fullness is the scarcity of Green—the scarcity of meaning, the existential anomie, that arises when social life becomes normless, completely and totally fragmented, something that is both liberating and destabilizing.

The operating system of an era is defined by the enabling technologies that dictate the new possibilities and frontiers of knowledge for human life. Most powerfully, technology advances the material life conditions such that what we value, what we think about, what we identify with, is actually transformed. Technology simply is the greatest driver of human evolution in all four quadrants that there is.

The operating system of an era is defined by a core philosophy, which sets the framework for our minds as we progress as a species. The operating system of our disintegrating modern era put religious-like faith in a philosophy of humanism and market liberalism that since the 18th century viewed man as a rational agent of liberty, property and reason, a democratic citizen largely free of communal obligation but still fully embedded in the market upon which he depended for his prosperity and esteem.

The philosophy of our postmodern, information age, a relativistic philosophy that is reaching its apex as we speak, is one of participative pluralism. In its quest for participation it distrusts all social boundaries, particularly power, and in its extreme versions it privileges the subjective experience of victims of power over and above other moral, scientific or artistic reasoning.

If, at its core, Orange philosophy was predicated on an irrealist myth of a market-based society which holds most sacred an individual's freedom from communal obligation, than the irrealist myth of Green is the vision of a power-free world which holds most sacred any who are hurt.

The operating system of an era is defined by other things as well: emergent sources of power; new forms of governance; new modes of economic

production and currencies; and changing individual self-identities and values, all of which influence and impact on each other.

So what will a Teal, transformation age operating system entail?

For one thing, it will have to accommodate new forms of power that are emerging: in all of history, whenever new forms of power emerge, new forms of governance must arise alongside them. As we'll see in our session on power, Green and Teal technologies—from Facebook to the blockchain—are new sources of power that are changing the deep structures of human life itself, which is why I called it the transformation age to begin with. As I argued in *The Great Release*, I believe that governance will need to significantly evolve to Teal, meta-systematic intelligence that includes whole systems thinking, polarities, and whole-part dynamics. In short, we'll have to progress from network governance models to holarchical governance models such as panarchy.

Just as Orange had to heal the problems of Amber, a teal operating system will also have to rebalance the contradictions of both the Orange and Green operating systems it's integrating.

For Orange, it will have to heal market liberalism, whose extreme versions idealize a total market-based society. This vision is simply a myth, and it reverses the natural holarchy, seeking to force social life to submit to the market, rather than see that market-based economic activity as one aspect of broader social life. Like an airplane with no seatbelts, this philosophy will continue to deprive society of policy options that can otherwise soften the turbulence of a rapidly-changing world. This will only exacerbate alienation amongst our Amber brothers and sisters, who already feel like strangers in a cosmopolitan, multiracial, interdependent world whose rewards disproportionately accrue to the fast and agile, the highly-educated, and those willing to forego family, home and tradition. This rebalancing must include preparing society for a Teal, post-dash world: post-energy,

post-automation, post-work, post-money, post-singularity, post-truth, post-orthodox, post-AI, and perhaps most importantly, post-certainty.

A teal operating system will also have to transcend the contradictions of Green: postmodern dominance of culture, whose extreme versions envision a world free from power differentials and value distinctions altogether. Green struggles to preserve exclusive social structures, to distinguish between male and female power, and to preserve the role of individual agency in life outcomes. In its place, cultural rules of Teal will value participation but come to include distinctions between actualization and domination power; between developmental value and intrinsic value; between inclusion and judgment; between language as socially-constructive and language as absolute; and as Ken Wilber has pointed out, between different kinds of validity claims: moral, aesthetic, objective and functional fitness.

A teal operating system will have to enable new forms of global coordination on trans-national threats: climate change, nuclear proliferation, bioterror, oceanic health, ecological deterioration. We need coordination across many different layers of the evolutionary stack. The US's Climate Alliance, led by California, coordinating with other nation-states, is a perfect example of moving to a higher state of agility, adaptability and overall global resilience.

And although there are other things a Teal operating system will have to include, I'll end with this one: it will have to liberate the intelligence of lower-order systems—those that are local and regional, and operate on faster timescales than global institutions—by giving them the freedom and flexibility to experiment, fail and learn. As an example, we can see evidence of this attitude in how the US Security and Exchange Commission has taken a balanced but light touch so far in the regulation of cryptocurrency innovation. I should hope this continues.

Never been better, never felt worse

And that brings us to the tension of the moment: things have never been better. Yet they've never felt worse, at least for many of us. The American columnist Franklin Pierce Adams said that "nothing is more responsible for the good old days than a bad memory." Even friends of mine who lived through the upheaval of the Vietnam years tell me that this moment somehow feels worse, more destabilizing.

This dread seems to stem from the feeling of living right inside the transition itself, most evident in the real-time radicalization of the American political system (and not just ours, but political systems across the west, in fact all the transcended Orange economies). The attacks on the free press. The conspiratorial-finger pointing at an all-powerful globalist elite. The scapegoating of immigrants who threaten to steal the jobs and change the culture of the native born. The racial dog whistles. Appeals to the traditional agrarian heartland against the coastal, big city progressives. The subversion of the rule of law. The dedicated effort to enclose a significant portion of an aggrieved minority within a propaganda-based, pre-factual echo chamber.

As one of my friends on Twitter reported last month, when talking to his 90-year old grandmother who lived through the rise of fascism in Nazi Germany, and I quote: "This is how it all started. This was what we lived through, and this is what I see arising again."

Yet I think it's easy to lose sight of how good we have it today. Human life has never, in all of its history, been better than it is today, and the past 200 years of progress have been mind-bending to the point of almost inconceivable.

The world has never been safer, more prosperous, healthier or more innovative. Relatively speaking, crime barely exists and warfare has virtually ended. Life spans have more than doubled in the past 100 years, and overall mortality and health outcomes are better than ever.

In the past 20 years alone, global poverty has been cut in half, and we'll likely wipe out poverty worldwide in our lifetime. In 1950, less than 10% of the world population was considered middle class; today it's almost 50%.

A century ago, just a few countries were actually democratic, and those only partly so; today, nearly two-thirds of all countries are democracies, with 64% of the world's population living in free or partly free conditions.

200 years ago, only 12% of the world's population could read; today, 86% of the world can do so. And alongside all of this, we're eradicating crippling disease.

In addition to these extraordinary outcomes, we're seeing a truly incomprehensible explosion of innovation throughout human life: we're interconnected by global data networks not only to each other, but to all of the knowledge and wisdom the species has created to this point; genomics is revolutionizing medicine and promises to provide everyone fully-personalized, genetically-tailored medical interventions within a generation; we may be on our way to stopping aging in the next few decades; we can harness the power of big data to generate insight that can dramatically improve our lives; machine learning is giving us back time and energy dedicated to everyday life tasks; automation and advanced manufacturing are simultaneously lowering the cost of producing everything while enabling the low cost production of anything; clean energy is changing the energy grid and mitigating the carbon surplus; a future of clean, free power is credibly visible for the first time; the blockchain is liberating the power of trans-national, trust-less record keeping that is creating innovation in everything from cryptocurrencies to providing a mode of exchange for the internet of things.

And it's not just technology: we're seeing a veritable explosion of innovation in our social systems, in political activism, fundraising, coalition formation and direct democracy, one of which, MiVote, you'll see this weekend from my friend Adam Jacoby; benefit corporations, spearheaded by one of my dear

friends and speakers here, John Montgomery, promise to give corporations a conscience by bringing sanity back to a broken, or at the very least highly-partial, corporate-societal contract. And on and on and on.

There remain real and significant challenges, of course, with each of these things posing new dilemmas along the way. But it's precisely because this explosion of innovation poses these new challenges that we know our current operating system is ill-equipped to the demands of tomorrow's governance. This suggests that we're not just in an average moment of political disruption or even economic reorganization.

We're entering an age of transformation.

The transformation age

In my view the transformation age itself started in 2007 with the advent of the smartphone and 3G, high-speed data networks, which interconnected virtually the entire human family in real time. It was underappreciated then, but by now we're beginning to see what I outlined in my [TED talk](#) five years ago, which is that the nature of trans-formation is that things change shape. That is, their deep structure undergoes modification.

What is changing shape? Everything: when we are able to share views, behavior, values, choices, resources, money, assets, perspectives... all from our pocket, all in real-time...the real structure of the world changes in powerful ways. The noosphere can adapt on a daily basis, and that accelerates knowledge and wisdom but it also accelerates the feedbacks in our daily lives, feedbacks that, from depression to loneliness to partisanship, are changing the shapes of our very mind and brain alongside them.

The noosphere is not just more adaptable, either: it can now be engineered upon by software and other platforms that have all kinds of motives to harness it to their cause. In the session on power, we'll look more closely at

the changing nature of power and why platforms have emerged as the new power centers in the world today.

In any case, we're like a rapidly-darting school of fish, enmeshed in the flow and rhythm of crowds, our values and communication changing subtly but so quickly, with the pace of social feedbacks accelerated to mere minutes, that we feel like we're being pulled along behind one of the cycles from Tron, which could pull an instantaneous, 90 degree turn, giving us a constant feeling of whiplash.

This is our new normal, a feeling that there is no longer any center, there is no longer any fixed point of reference in society, or in truth, or in our lives. What is particularly destabilizing is the fact that this cultural and social decentering is happening at the very moment that our democratic, rule of law-based government, which, despite cynicism is still psychologically one of the deepest and most sacred institutions that we can look to for a real sense of societal security, if not solidarity—that that too, seems to be turning into a tribal, pre-modern power mafia, with even its leaders betraying our expectations that they uphold even the most basic of civil norms.

And of course, we understand what's happening here: this is precisely what the interior of a Green society feels like when Red and Amber forces hijack Orange power structures, all while a transition to Teal has begun. This is Green in the mid-stages of its mainstream apex: an aperspectival culture with no fixed points of reference; a post-truth landscape where, paradoxically, even as subjectivity reigns supreme, it actually equips the crowd to rise up and shout down individual diversity; a participative society where social platforms emerge as new power players, but have not yet discerned how to wield that power properly; a democratic society that flirts with authoritarianism because truth itself has become a victim of tribalism. A society that, as Ken Wilber so accurately diagnosed, doesn't yet know how to differentiate between actualization and dominator power structures.

So the great release is a disruption and dawning of a new global operating system, and like all those before it, a new jockeying for power is underway. It is in the midst of all this strife, and fury, and relativism that the messengers become the message: loud, shrill, and frequently immoral, Trump was able to break through and speak to the grievance of people who feel unsafe, who feel threatened racially, who feel uncertain and left behind both culturally and economically.

The world order held together by US power after 1945 has been breaking down in the last 20 years with the grievances of white populists taking center stage since the dawn of the transformation age. Since 1970, the dominant cultural power of the progressives and the dominant capital power of the neoliberals has created a two-fold sense of dispossession by the white working and middle classes, both culturally and economically.

They feel they've been losing on all fronts. They're rising up in a new form of chaotic populism throughout America, France, Germany, UK, Austria and beyond, in response to the disruption posed by the Green mode of economic production: post-industrial, knowledge-centric globalism. Like the major transitions before them, there are always those left behind in the move to a new operating system; and today they are being asked to give up the industrial age and submit to a Green, multiracial, interdependent world. But the post-World War II social contract is faltering, and they're no longer willing to trade cultural territory for economic gains that have disappeared.

This is precisely unreleased tension in the social holarchy: a layer of the evolutionary social holon that has been transcended but feels excluded, and in a move of revolt, the minority has regressed to a defensive Amber in order to hijack both the national holon and the global governance holon and stymie its further upward growth and transcendence.

For proof, look no further than America trying to starve the United Nations of funding and strong arm it to do its bidding: this is precisely a rejection of network governance in favor of an earlier imperial governance.

When we find minority political interests trying to subvert the national identity or even the multi-national system of governance, it's an argument amongst holonic levels. And not just an argument, but a political battle of different parts of the holarchy trying to work out a new truth, a new sort of evolutionary integration between healthy and unhealthy holonic dynamics. Healthy is inclusion of the part, and submission to the whole. Unhealthy is repression of the part, and hijacking the whole.

The rise of populism

It's worth reminding here that populism arises throughout history in the modern era anytime such holarchical distortions occur. To mention just two examples, the European Revolutions of 1848 were instigated by the pains of early industrialization across Europe, and the People's Party of 1892 arose from the agrarian and class disruptions of industrial oligarchy in the U.S.

This latter example, in particular, is very instructive. In the midst of the robber baron era of booming industrial capitalism in the late 19th century, an aggrieved, nativist minority rose up on the back of what some have called the "agrarian myth," this idea that there was a golden era that the U.S. had now left behind. And just notice here: the myth always points to a golden era that lies before the most recent operating system transition. In the 1890s they mythologized agrarianism; today they mythologize industrialism.

The blame for evolution is always placed at the feet of a phantom: an elite group of powerful interests in the form of the money holders on the coasts, and the sense that there is a conspiracy to over power and hold down the rural, native born lower classes. Nativism, racism and ethnic nationalism are of particular importance in defining the enemy: the Jews and all immigrants

were the targets in the 1890s; today it's Muslims, blacks and immigrants from Mexico and the Middle East.

As Thomas Watson, the founder of IBM, wrote with what sounds like a scathing sneer: "We have become the world's melting pot. The scum of creation has been dumped on us. What brought these Goths and Vandals to our shores?"

Populism almost always signals that there is some failure of social and political accommodation underway, and likely also long-term structural transcendence in the social holon. The forces of resistance are rallying to combat this dislocation. In our current era, the left behind have given the finger to the globalists and said,

"No way, we will not find ourselves the second race in our own country. We're going to resist the emergent cosmopolitanism of the 21st century, the multiculturalism, the economic globalization, the cultural integration, the loss of our borders, our meaning structures, our skin color, our traditional power structures, and we're going to fight back."

At a conceptual level at least, populism is the strain of thinking in any political group who feel like they have no control over their future, who are terrified that those with more power, especially an elite group of insiders, are taking advantage of them. It's especially convenient when there is an ethnic minority to demonize, as there always is.

Let's get more tactical for a moment, because a lot of my work is dedicated to being smart about transformation. Stupid activism does as much harm as good.

Populism thrives on emotional truths, not cognitive ones. It doesn't seem to need, nor even be interested in, real, objective truth as we conventionally

think about it. What it is interested in is hearing emotional truths: statements and symbols that adequately capture the anger and grievance they feel.

Trump uses these symbols to great effect: football players kneeling at the national anthem is a powerful symbol that captures why nativists feel like they're losing their traditions and culture. It doesn't matter that there is Green-level truth in the systemic racism that's being protested, what is focused on is the Amber-level emotional resonance of how outrageous the nativists find the protest to begin with. They simply have no interest in seeing beyond the outrage.

Let's go one level deeper: The populist movement, as a social holon, has an Amber-level dominant mode of discourse and resonance. The relational exchange within the social holon is emotional, not cognitive, and the emotional discourse acts to affirm that they are members of a sub-group that is persecuted and oppressed by an all-powerful elite. At its core, the semiotics of populism are designed to reinforce solidarity as a persecuted minority; the primary currency exchanged within the social holon is made up of symbols of persecution.

Think about it this way: standard Newtonian materials get softer or more pliable as they absorb energy. But the GOP under Trump acts more like a non-Newtonian substance. Backed by an angry base, it actually firms up the harder it gets hit and the more energy it absorbs. Pedophilia, nuclear war, loss of longstanding allies, lies, moral outrage... none of these have any long-term impact on the populist because the mind has already been put into a siege mentality of alienation and persecution.

This makes it particularly hard to counter, because in the face of these affronts, so many of the moves that conventional society instinctually makes, with its center of gravity between Orange and Green, actually affirm and make stronger the populist's cause: if you go to Orange, post-Enlightenment liberal democratic values, you're simply seen as arguing on behalf of an

establishment that is hypocritical in its thirst for greed and power. If you call out a demagogue on his excesses, his moral failings or his lies, all you do is affirm how perfect of an anti-hero he is. If you spend all your time and energy highlighting how deviant the entertainer is, how dangerous the show he's putting on really is, then you actually amplify the emotional satisfaction that defiant voters are getting out of the show.

In all of these moves and others, your conventional instincts backfire, only making the emotional currency being exchanged inside the social holon that much stronger, that much more valuable; you end up reinforcing loyalty to the chieftain while making his followers *even less open to influence*.

Over the past few decades, through the work of partisan media—there has arisen an impenetrable firewall around the mind of the populist. This has produced rampant epistemic closure, the closing of minds to outside points of view. The way I've said it before, and the way I'll say it today, is it has drastically hobbled the noosphere as a functioning domain of political life for the foreseeable future. The world of the mind, the world of opinion, the world of punditry, the world of rational communication, is almost dead, at least for now.

It's important though that we don't get too caught up in the flow of the moment, that we bear in mind the long view of evolution, that we keep in our hearts the gratitude that life has never been better. An amazing, Teal world of promise dawns right before us. It doesn't feel good because the momentous leap is also a disintegration of the old, and there are people who desperately resist the future by clinging to the least healthy aspects of earlier operating systems, where tribalism replaces rationality, where fear replaces trust, where power replaces liberty.

But take heart that we've been here many times before and this is but a minor blip on the evolutionary radar. Our job is to foster the emergence of this new, integrative operating system, to support as it reorganizes and

liberates the stored potential of our species worldwide. It's an operating system that will begin to solve for a new scarcity, that of resilience, using a new power, the power to integrate, relying on the consciousness and kosmic integrity like that of the people in this room to lead the way.

I'm going to close this set of introductory comments here and invite you to join Jeff and me in a conversation over the remaining hour. I hope these initial thoughts are useful as we step back and reflect on 2017 through a broad enough historical and evolutionary perspective that we walk away with a sense of relief, and also clarity, about the path into the transformation age and how we might serve it.