

Nature Redux: Wicked Problems, Creative Thinking, and the Transcendentalist

Michael Few

Eighteen months ago, I embarked on a journey to pursue an academic solution for Iraq. After redeploying from the Surge, I wanted to merge the gap between counter-insurgency and stabilization and reconstruction. I wanted to figure out how WE could fix Iraq's problems. I wanted to find a way to win. In truth, it was never simply about Iraq. I was trying to reconcile the world I knew as a boy with the world that I know as a man.

Initially, I began my research investigating the different perspectives of various compilations of social sciences. I examined Zaganayah from the objective lens of the anthropologist, the economist, the historian, and the sociologist. Each lens provided a unique insight but no solution. At the end of every path, I felt like I was running into a brick wall. I searched past social sciences and attempted to merge economics with psychology. In this realm, I was able to devise a new way of thinking that I could understand.

Then, I realized that it was not a new idea. It is as old as the Earth- we just forgot it along the way. Throughout my research, I discovered another time period that may prove relevant today. What happened? I picked up a collection of Ralph Waldo Emerson's works. During the 1800's, the Transcendentalist attempted to tackle the wicked problems of their day- slavery, Civil War: the then crisis of the Nation State, the Global War on Anarchist, the search for a theory of evolution, and the transition from agrarian life to the age of industrialization.

Throughout his life, Emerson suffered a series of personal tragedies leaving him traumatized. He took a sabbatical to Europe to recover after his first wife died. When he returned, he centered himself. He wrote many poems, essays, and books describing his newfound philosophy. His writings eventually defined the American Spirit of Self-Reliance and the American Dream for over a century.

Simultaneously, I struggled with my own trauma. After seven concussions from contact sports and combat, I was diagnosed with traumatic brain injury, TBI. I could no longer think the way I used to think. During my last combat tours, I did not even realize that I was blacking out after every IED attack. I simply drove on and sucked it up. I could no longer process, and the realization was frustrating and maddening at times. I could still produce the same output, but my process was skewed. It was my personal wicked problem. I had to find new ways to cope. I learned a new way to think.

A simple formula emerged:

Curiosity + Intelligence + Emotional Intelligence + Creativity = New Ideas

New ideas can form new ways of thinking and decision making process. Ideas lead to assumptions. Assumptions lead to planning. They can eventually lead to new policies of least bad solutions. Before we can define grand strategies, we must frame our philosophy on how we see the world. Before we can save the world, we must center ourselves. We have to crawl before we can walk. During the Cold War, it was black and white, good versus evil. Today, it is gray. How do we resolve?

I wrote the following essay as a modern sequel to Emerson's works. It is more philosophy than policy, more spiritual than religious, and more hopeful than tragic. It describes a portion of my journey, and it lays out my ideas. It may simply be a creative writing product. It could be the start of a new way of thinking. I do not know, but it did help me.

At the Academy, I was taught to voice truth to power regardless of the personal consequences. I was taught to tell my boss what he needed to hear not wanted to hear. This essay is the truth as I currently understand. This essay is true to form.

*Nature Redux*¹

Be not a slave of your own past. Plunge into the sublime seas, dive deep and swim far, so you shall come back with self-respect, with new power, with an advanced experience that shall explain and overlook the old.

I am a soldier. My mindfulness derived from the darkest corners as my friends behead their neighbors over Wasta or Shar'iah that which you cannot process much less comprehend. In betwixt and in between, I observed the best and worst of the human condition. At our worst, we descend into a Hobbesian state of anarchy. At our best, we soar past the moon to explore the vastness of the universe.

Break point- the observations of the most extremes unnerved my inner core. I was painfully aware. I could see in a way that I never saw before. This realization unnerved my natural homeostatic state, and I thrust into a condition of liminality- ambiguity, openness, indeterminacy, and disorientation. After six years of combat, I returned home to the United States- a nation that I could no longer understand nor assimilate.

Subsequently, I embarked on an inward journey striving to achieve ashura- that constant absence of sorrow. From the highest seas to the deepest ocean, I lost control to regain control. Somewhere along the way, I understood that any virtue can become toxic if taken to extreme. Recovered, resolved, and refocused, I realize that today is no different than yesterday. My path allowed me to awake from the slumber.

¹ All italics are Ralph Waldo Emerson's words.

Anew, I relearned to live.

Many moons ago, Ralph Waldo Emerson challenged us to actualize our self-reliance laying the foundation of the great American spirit. In the wake of this current storm, as fear and greed and apathy attempt to consume, it is time to revisit, relearn, and retake control. I grieved far too long. Now, *I grieve that neither grief nor fear will teach me nothing.* Forever the optimist while grounded in the pragmatism of fragile progress, I will attempt to reframe the truth by invoking the transcendentalist. This is Nature Redux.

Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint stock company in which the members agree for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender his liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs. Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist.

The condition of man evolved the science and technological revolutions to naught. Capitalism left unregulated descends to greed destroying the social fabric of this land. The guerillas revolt from grievances perceived. The ownership society mocks self-reliance as the village unravels into many individual islands of one. The ungoverned, illiterate, and impoverished martyr themselves in wretched explosions murdering the innocent. The social contract defaults into the quid pro quo of balanced opposition. The hurricane of fear storms in from the east.

These are the days unrealized that try men's souls- terrorism, global warming, and globalization. Is this change progress in some advancement of the state of man or is the limiting mirror image of our father's past underscored by distractions of bright shiny objects prohibiting self-awareness and actualization?

Void of values, beliefs, and morals, anomie ensues. The tsunami of greed consumes. Distractions plague the unassuming in unawareness trapped in the pursuit of happiness turned towards gluttony. Buy, Buy, Buy- credit unfrozen to satisfy our wants and stimulate our endless consumption. Self-reliance misunderstood, corrupted, and deceived in propaganda and deception of red and blue states, free-markets and socialism, brother against brother in a game of zero-sum. Spend, Spend, Spend- as taxes are cut pray tell it alleviates our fear in some simple holy grail of Keynesian worship- that deity of profit that never quite quenches. Scream, Scream, Scream- the civility of debate refocused into yelling mindless talking points disorienting the masses.

Void of faith, hope, and love, acephalous societies emerge and divided we fall.

All science has one aim, namely, to find a theory of nature. We have theories of races and of functions, but scarcely yet a remote approach to an idea of creation. We are now so far from the road to truth, that religious leaders dispute and hate each other, and speculative men are esteemed unsound and frivolous. But to a sound judgment, the most abstract truth is the most practical. Whenever a true theory appears, it will be its own evidence. Its test is that it will explain all phenomena. Now many are thought not only unexplained but inexplicable; as language, sleep, madness, dreams, beasts, sex.

Conceptual blocks confound the most informed as the scientific method and unproved theorems cloud the framing. Specialization in learning separates emotion and utility as mutually exclusive. Is the function of my heart not intertwined with my brain? These experts proclaim today's problems as too complex, hostile, dynamic, and confusing and dub them wicked, messy, and irreconcilable. The experts seek to minimize the consequences instead of solving the problem. Muddling through towards emptiness as secondary and tertiary effects dovetail into the wretched social conflict left unprovoked- the meta-game is hidden by the blinders of our lack of creativity.

Compartmentalized psychosis overcame our society in the wake of the towers fall. Osama Bin Ladin, a petty miscreant, ascended into infamy in the west and glory to the east. A rally cry whispered across the world to revolt against the Great Satan- that democratic experiment invoked long ago by the founding fathers in the city of brotherly love. Roosevelt cautioned us that the only thing to fear is fear itself yet we wall our borders and strangle our airports in mass hysteria hyper vigilant of the remote possibility that the heel of a shoe may explode. Paradoxically, the more we strive to secure the homeland, the less we are secure.

In truth, undoubtedly we have no questions to ask which are unanswerable. We must trust the perfection of the creation so far, as to believe that whatever curiosity the order of things has awakened in our minds, the order of things can satisfy. Every man's condition is a solution in hieroglyphic to those inquiries he would put. He acts it as life, before he apprehends it as truth. In like manner, nature is already, in its forms and tendencies, describing its own design. Let us interrogate the great apparition that shines so peacefully around us. Let us inquire, to what end is nature?

We campaign on hope ever fearful that hope is not a method. Ever so mindful, always ever mindful, the audacity of hope transcends. After every storm fades, the sun will rise again, and a new day begins. Today is not Armageddon. The American Dream is not dead. In the end and somewhere in between, peace ensues. Let us trust in each other again. Let us regain our faith. Let us love again. Let us reclaim our spirit. Let this next generation be the best generation in the dreams that our best days are ahead. How do we start to reconcile? How do we escape the ferocity of the challenges before us? How do we protect ourselves from nature's storms? I know not these solutions just yet, but I have faith that we can overcome as our forefathers overcame tyranny, tragedy, and transgressions. First, we must embrace the human condition. We must accept that mankind is inherently evil and perpetually good intertwined in the yin and yang of our spirit. We must break down our paradigms to strive past our individual and collective mental blocks- honestly, brutally defining the problem set as it is not how we wish it to be. It must be done. As the cloudiness fades away, remember that in spite all of our faults we have three gifts- faith, hope, and love, and the greatest of these is love.

Major James Michael Few is an active duty armor officer. He served in various command and staff positions in Iraq. Currently, he is pursuing a master's degree in Defense Analysis for Irregular War at the Naval Postgraduate School. The views expressed in this commentary are his own and do not reflect the views or policies of the United States of Government.

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