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November-December 2008 Issue

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Self and Other: The Essential Polarity

In our last newsletter, we reprinted a letter by Barry Johnson, author of *Polarity Management*. In this issue we want to explore how the current financial crisis we suffer today is in part a consequence of our inability to manage a fundamental polarity, that of self and other.

A polarity consists of two opposite points of view that are interdependent and cannot function independent of the other. For example, inhalation and exhalation is a polarity to manage. I must inhale and exhale. If I exclude one side or the other, I quickly run into problems. Other common polarities to manage are individual/team; manufacturing/sales; buy/sell; and market driven/product driven, just to mention a few.

We often confuse polarities with problems to solve. A problem has only one answer – which car to buy, what restaurant to eat in, or what color shirt to wear. Once you choose, no other answer is possible. But a polarity can never be solved. The two poles are interdependent and complementary. Rather, the two poles must be managed together in order to achieve our higher purpose.

When one side of a polarity becomes dominant at the expense of the other side, the end result is that you suffer the negative down-side of the dominant pole. Another way of saying this is that the overuse of a strength leads directly to a weakness.

One of the most fundamental of all polarities is the self/other polarity. This polarity is intrinsic to a variety of polarities – self/family; nation/world; individual/team; family/community; and corporation/community.

For example, to achieve, a healthy, cohesive family unit, both the individual and the family members must benefit. If

one side of the polarity becomes too dominant, both the individual and the family unit suffer. In the same way, corporations (self) that fail to adapt to changing needs and demands of the customer base (other) will sooner or later be out of business. An all too evident example is the American automobile industry.

The Financial Crisis: A Failed Polarity

In the difficult economic times we now face, it is easy to parse out blame. There is little doubt that human greed (the **self** being overdone and showing up as selfishness) for wealth, power and influence played key roles in creating the economic mess we find ourselves in. When greed rules the human mind and economic and political power become ends in themselves rather than means to serve the common good (the **other**), and profit is taken without regard for communal well-being, the consequences are the very difficulties that we face today.

The real culprit is far more systemic than any particular financial group, political party or any other scapegoat. Rather than the tyranny of a greedy ruling class, what we really suffer is the tyranny of belief, a way of thinking embraced and supported to the exclusion of all other beliefs or systems. It becomes “The Way” and not to be trifled with by unbelievers or sullied by the inclusion of any alternative belief. It claims universal truth and efficiency, and sees itself as the only valid approach to accomplishment and resolving difficulties. It is the dogmatic adherence to a set of principles to the exclusion of all other possibilities.

This way of thinking is familiar in religious fundamentalism, with adherents insisting that their beliefs are the only true beliefs. Unfortunately, we also find this exclusionary way of thinking in our economic beliefs, where capitalism and free enterprise is seen as the only valid system, that the markets will certainly regulate themselves, and that any other economic system, such as the “evil socialism” is so wrong, so awful, that even to mention its name is anathema to the true believers.

There is no doubt that capitalism with free enterprise is a powerful economic system that can produce great wealth. But when we overdo its strength, we find a great weakness that has been overlooked to our peril.

Capitalism becomes tyrannical when free enterprise is touted as the saviour of economic man, and any deviation from its doctrines is viewed as heresy. Similar to any dogmatism, this belief system is well supported by a high-priest class, social, political, economic and academic elites who supply evidence after evidence of its superiority. Unfortunately, this is characterized by an arrogance full of certainty about its own knowledge and rightness.

The consequence of arrogance is limited creativity and vision, resulting in a predictable and inevitable crisis as we are driven right into the inherent weaknesses of our dogma.

The mortgage crisis is a clear example of this. The over-dependence on free market ideology led directly to bank deregulation (unregulated banking was a significant causal factor in the great depression) and the failure to regulate both the mortgage and

energy exchanges, allowing human greed and the profit motive (the self) to run disastrously unchecked.

Then, when foreclosures started increasing at alarming rates, no one intervened on the part of the community (the other). What would have happened if, instead of allowing foreclosure, banks and lending institutions would have renegotiated every home mortgage, working hard to keep people in their homes? Of course, profits would drop somewhat, Wall Street would have screamed, and some CEOs would not earn their bonuses. But AIG would not have failed, Lehman Brothers would not be out of business, Fannie May and Freddie Mac would have remained solvent, and Merrill Lynch would still be owned by Merrill Lynch.

But far more importantly, neighborhoods would remain intact, home values would not drop precipitously, and tax-payers would not be paying out the nose to rescue the very institutions that gambled on risky derivatives solely for their own profit.

The unswerving indulgence in free market ideology (self) and the failure to adapt in a visionary way for the common good (other) led to the crisis that we face today. The inability to step outside of our belief systems and see the greater, more complete picture, of the whole, leads us blindly into greater difficulties. And the more fearful the situation becomes for us, the more rigidly we hold on to our systems and beliefs. We become increasingly short-sighted, focused on an apparent present danger, we cannot see the cliff looming in the future. No longer adaptive to changing circumstances, we cling more and more rigidly to beliefs and systems that no longer work for us or for the greater good.

The mortgage crisis and the resultant monetary crisis is the inevitable consequence of the over-reliance or use of a strength (free market) which turns that strength directly into a weakness. The visceral reaction to socialism as an alternative system has turned this strength into a punishing weakness.

Regulation (often called Socialism by the dogmatists) is not **the** answer in and of itself. If we over-regulate as a reaction to failed markets, and ignore the fundamental polarity of self and other, or in this case, capitalism and socialism, we will only end up in the down-side of regulation.

We must reward individual initiative, creativity and effort, but to do so at the cost of the community is not only short-sited, but dangerously stupid. Nor can we simply move to the opposite pole, and follow a dogmatic socialism that inhibits creative individualism. This is a classic polarity that must be recognized and managed effectively if we are to gain the benefits of both - individual effort and community well-being.

"The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function."

F. Scott Fitzgerald

*We at SIS wish
you and yours a
Joyful Holiday Season
and a prosperous and
wonder-filled
New Year.*