

Draft Outline, or a Long Elevator Speech:

Understanding Change and Our Critical Place in History: Explaining the Accelerating Technical and Social Changes and the New Story of the 21st Century

“We are at a very critical period in human history where many trends are converging to critical moments. What we do in the coming years will determine if this is the best or the worst century in human history.” – Lord Sterns

We use cultural stories to make sense of the world, tell ourselves how it works, tell us what to expect in the future, and to serve as a guide for how to live our lives. Examples include: the American dream, struggle of good vs. evil, rugged individualism and freedom, American exceptionalism, tribalism, religion, continued scientific and moral progress, cyclical history, decline, technology will save us, markets will save us...

While these stories may have been useful in the past, none of these are a good guide to the situation we are facing now and in the near term future. I would like to outline and promote a new story, one that is appropriate to the world we find ourselves in and that will produce positive changes. It starts with the following elements of our current reality.

1. **Exponential growth in key technologies** will change our society in fundamental ways. We are facing multiple “Gutenberg moments” simultaneously (i.e. the social changes brought on by the printing press). Examples include: new energy technologies, machine intelligence, biotechnology, nanotechnology, social media, health care, physical & mental enhancement.
2. **The speed of social change** is also significantly increasing. Examples include changing attitudes towards women, homosexuality, marriage, diversity... We are facing the early years of a century of increased immigration, and it's already very disruptive to social stability.
3. **We have exceeded the carrying capacity of our environment**, and have severely depleted many of our key non-renewable resources. Climate change, the extinction crisis, and peak oil are the biggest example of this.
4. **Structural Change in the Economy**: Loss of jobs, increased concentration of wealth and power, global competition and trade...
5. **Improved understanding of how the world works** - in the past few decades the scientific view of the world has substantially changed. Many of our institutions, religions, and attitudes have not adjusted to this yet. These areas include: Cosmology and big history, evolutionary psychology, environmental systems...
6. **Failures of old governance models and institutions** to deal with rapid change. The ability to do mass manipulation of the culture and voting outcomes is challenging the traditional notions of democracy. In the age of increased complexity has the idea of an “informed citizen” itself become unrealistic? Many major countries have failed or are struggling as democracies. There is a growing problem of weaponized narratives and social media.

7. **Our “stone age instincts”**, and the ability to pander to them in unlimited amounts is causing increasing problems. Examples include: sweets & fats, addictive drugs, porn, greed, anger and outrage, tribalism. This is making the idea of a global community very challenging.

A new story -The Great Transition: It starts with this meta-narrative: we are facing a great transition which will determine much of the future of humankind. We are heading into a period of chaos, or approaching a cusp point, where small nudges can make dramatic changes. The actions and events can have a profound influence on where we go from here. There are multiple possible future worlds that we may have a choice among, but going down one path may preclude the other paths. The future outcome of this transition period is by no means determined, with the possible exception that “business as usual” is not one of the options. We have an optimistic future if we work hard to solve our problems and don’t screw it up. Now is one of the most important times to be alive in human history.

The optimistic future narrative includes the following elements:

1. **Increasing levels of cooperation** at larger and larger scales (instead of just competition).
2. **“Management of the commons”** will become the key economic issue.
3. **Intellectual and Social Capital** will become more important than physical capital.
4. **Systems view** and emergent properties will become the new way to understand the world.
5. **Sustainability will become a key principle:** in terms of renewable resources and environmental impact, maintaining infrastructure, maintaining institutions, economic stability, political stability (in terms of dealing with problems in a reasonable fashion).
6. **Constantly improving quality of life** (as opposed to simply growth in consumption)
7. **Full development and use of our human resources:** though education and equal opportunity for everyone.
8. **Improved ability to make collective decisions** - to govern ourselves better.

How does such a story help people?

People are searching for meaning in a confusing world that doesn’t make sense. They want to know where things are headed, and have some assurances that things will work out. They’re also curious about the new technology changes happening. They want to know what they can do, where to focus their energy, and to know that there is something worth focusing their energy on.

It has also been noted that Hillary Clinton had all the right answers on policy issues for the 2016 election, but had no compelling narrative to tie them all together. Trump had less substantive policies, but a very compelling narrative for his base.