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NewAcropolis

Developing Inner Life

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A Nature-Based Approach to Schooling

The Mythical Aspect of the Olympic Games

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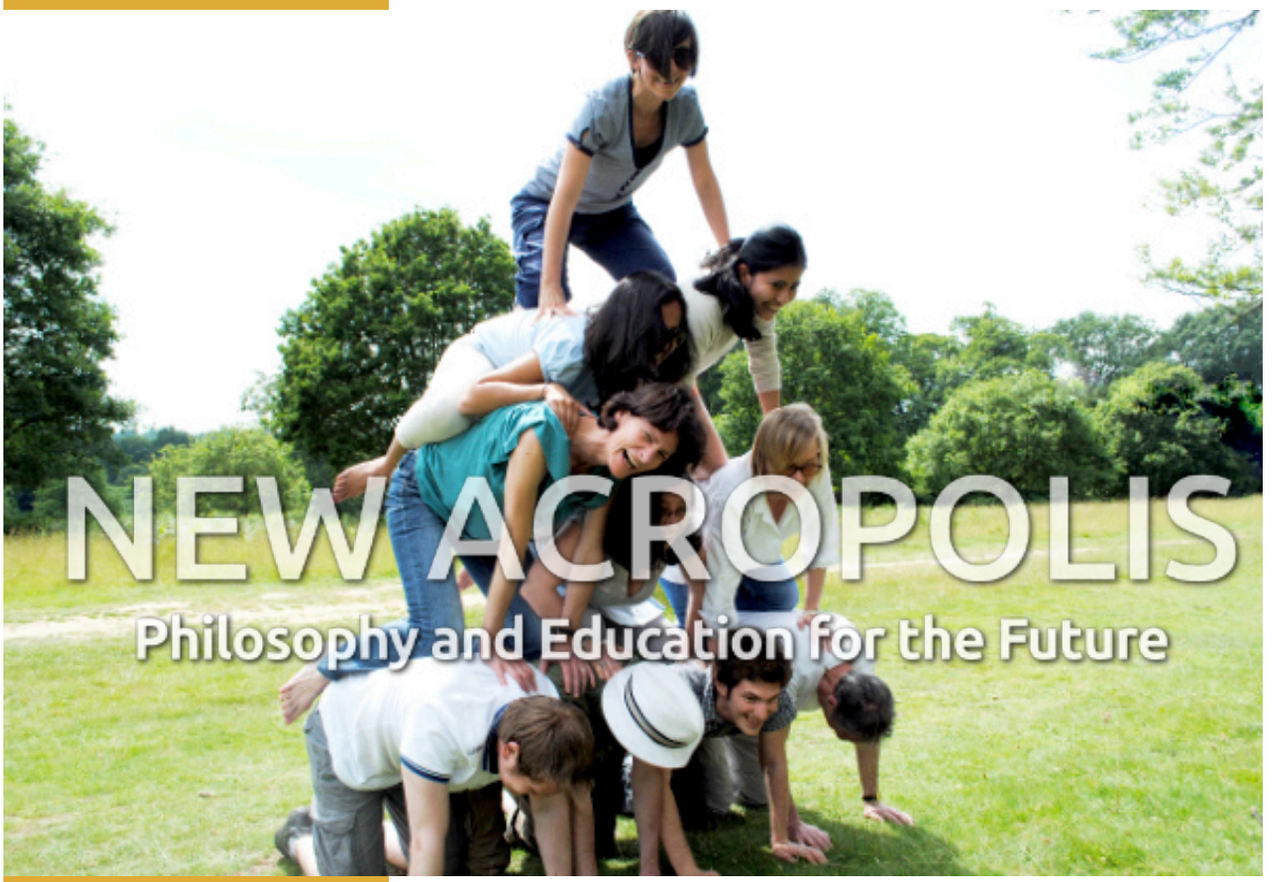

About Us

NEW ACROPOLIS is an international organization working in the fields of philosophy, culture and volunteering. Our aim is to revive philosophy as a means of renewal and transformation and to offer a holistic education that can develop both our human potential as well as the practical skills needed in order to meet the challenges of today and to create a better society for the next generation.

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What's Inside

Editorial

Is Meaning Dead?

I have always believed that it is healthy to question everything every now and then and to check whether the beliefs we have adopted during our journey through life are still valid. In some way, we could call this a mini-crisis of meaning because it can be quite painful, even destructive to current arrangements, and a time of great sadness and loneliness because suddenly we might not enjoy what we used to any more and not fit in any more with our usual community. To a certain extent, we should not avoid or be afraid of these moments of hopelessness, despair, anxiety or great sadness because they are often turning points and lead to renewal and growth.

However, if we get stuck in this process for too long and can only cope by numbing ourselves, then this crisis of meaning becomes unhealthy and paralyzing. Rising reports of anxiety, depression and loneliness suggest that we are suffering today from a kind of chronic, low-level sense of meaninglessness in Western societies, a lack of motivation and a sense of disorientation, which is even more pronounced in young people and teenagers, whereas it used to be typical of the midlife crisis of previous generations.

What has changed? Our previous sources of meaning (religions, communities, traditions) have become obsolete and the promises of secularization, globalization and economic growth for all have not been fulfilled. Declining trust in governments and institutions, fewer shared narratives, the destruction of our environment, and also disillusionment with technology – after all, the promised connection and knowledge became outweighed by misinformation, loneliness and digital fatigue – have led to a great sense of disillusionment, apathy and a feeling of powerlessness.

Nihilism has become mainstream and postmodern philosophy, popular culture, films and music often reflect and spread its message that life itself is without meaning, purpose or value and that there is no objective basis for moral truths, even if this is impossible to prove and therefore an opinion rather than a fact. But is nihilism really the final answer to our millennia-old quest for the meaning of life? Is meaning now, after God, also dead?

The fact that we seem to have an ingrained need to search for and find some meaning in our lives is significant. If humans are part of the universe, and humans can experience meaning, then doesn't this suggest that meaning is already somehow present in the universe? If the universe were entirely devoid of meaning, how could one of its parts (us) 'generate it' or even have the notion of it? In other words: if the universe produces beings that are capable of meaning, would it not be logical to suggest that meaning is a latent property of the universe?

There is actually a broad consensus that meaning does exist in some form or other. The divide lies as to whether meaning arises solely from human minds and does not exist 'out there' in the fabric of the cosmos (the subjective or 'emergent' view), or whether meaning is built into the structure of reality itself, independent of human invention (the 'fundamental' or objective view). A synthesis of both views would suggest that meaning is a 'hidden potential' that does already exist but which needs to be actualized to become real for us.

On another note, I don't believe that our human evolution or the evolution of the universe has finished, so why *should* we be able to grasp the ultimate meaning of life now? Would it not be arrogant to think that in our current evolutionary state we could fully understand the purpose of the universe? Only time and evolution will tell. And our understanding of meaning will surely change and grow as we go through changes and growth.

Meaning is not dead. But what has become increasingly meaningless is probably the way we see life. A purely materialistic and utilitarian outlook that reduces existence to consumption, productivity and measurable outputs is bound to produce a sense of disenchantment. When we see love as 'just chemistry', nature as 'just resources', and human worth as 'just economic value', then we have truly lost something vital.

Only a proper crisis of meaning can wake us up from this reductionist view of the world and of ourselves and connect us again with our yearning for depth, wonder, enchantment and transcendence. For the time being, let us face with courage the apparent meaninglessness of pain and suffering, let us assume our responsibility to create or discover meaning for ourselves and let us continue to explore with untiring curiosity the existential questions that seem to be inherent in our human nature.

Sabine Leitner

Developing Inner Life

"Inner life is indispensable"

Jorge Angel Livraga Rizzi

In general scientists and philosophers agree that what we call 'Life' is characterized by movement, and 'inner life' is the same, except that the movement is of an inner or invisible nature. This includes the movements of the 'stranger within' whom we can recognize as a presence that has always accompanied us, and whom we might call our Inner Being. This being is without any age, gender or particular style and with no discernible features or qualifications except the knowledge and memory of ourself. This strange friend has the singular ability to be with us, to witness us in better and worse moments and, if we allow it, the ability to help us become who we truly are.

Traditions of East and West suggest through diverse symbols and stories that by developing inner life and getting to know our inner being we can learn to walk inward paths. These interesting paths lead us into the unknown where we curiously meet familiar realizations; eternal paths along which it might be possible to never really feel alone again and transformative paths which helps us to grow. We come to see that inner life is not something separate from ordinary-outer life but informs and guides it, so we can act based on something that is

Photo by Ashley Batz on Unsplash

ours from within and not solely a reaction to changing circumstance.

Just as there are different planes and directions of movement in outer life, different planes and directions of movement exist in inner life and for the inner being. Our general psychological life, where thoughts and feelings come and go, and ruminate around without necessarily being resolved, could be referred to as our horizontal axis and movement. The everyday dimension of thought and feeling demonstrates inner life in its smaller

dimension (like a bubble on the surface of the ocean). We can often mistake this for the sum of our inner life, but with the horizontal axis alone we remain at the surface and our reflections are typically superficial. What we want to discover is a vertical axis, a movement of height and depth, that can have a transformative effect on our life. The vertical plane has different laws to the horizontal plane: for example, imagine trying to glide above or dive beneath the ocean; we cannot use rowing skills to gain those perspectives. The vertical axis helps us to understand what is meant by the larger dimension of inner life, the plane and movement that philosophy helps us to seek.

Discovering the vertical axis with its movements of height and depth can be supported through the use of symbols, contemplation of nature, stories from myth and with exercises of imagination and concentration (to name a few). All help us to learn the language of the inner being (which is not English, French or any other!). The aim of learning this language is to comprehend the insights of the inner being, insights which come from our past and our future. One of the most helpful characteristics of discovering the vertical axis of inner life is that even when things are difficult, it is possible to approach and undertake them with a perspective that gives us a sense of calm. We seek this larger dimension not just for the sake of knowing something new but also for living in a more serene way with effectiveness and good humour towards others.

Inner life can help us feel more connected with those who are not necessarily present with us physically, but may be far away or even 'on the other side of life'. Above all, through reflection, we can see our own reality and the reality of the world around us with greater clarity and so begin the work of improving ourselves and contributing to a better world.

We can all improve our inner life, learn to speak its language better and dialogue with our inner being. It requires good nourishment through the habits we form alongside the ideas and images we take to heart. Once we start to set it in motion, inner life indeed becomes indispensable and the practice of philosophy becomes the key to enter and support it, so we become stable in all directions, horizontal and also vertical to the depths and height of Life!

Siobhan Farrar

The 'House of Life'

the Wisdom and Mystery Schools in Ancient Egypt

I will never forget a very well-educated friend of mine who once said, with a hint of contempt in his voice, that the Egyptians didn't have philosophy. He claimed they weren't worth studying, and this is a view I have heard more than once – that Western civilization was born entirely of Greek and Roman thought.

We now know, however, that the Greeks were deeply inspired by Egypt. Many of the foundational ideas of our civilization were of Egyptian origin and history shows that figures like Pythagoras, Plato, Thales, Hippocrates, Herodotus and Solon went to Egypt to study, often for years at a time. Moreover, as Bill Manley showed in his book *The Oldest Book in the World – Philosophy in the Age of the Pyramids*, they even had a word for philosophy (see *New Acropolis* magazine No. 62, *The Wisdom of Ptahhotep*).

The profound influence of Egyptian thought became even clearer in 2005 when two Egyptology professors published *The Book of Thoth,* a previously unknown Egyptian religious text. Believing its teachings were too important

Thoth and Seti I, Abydos. Image by Wikimedia

to be confined to academia, they later published *Conversations in the House of Life* in 2013, a version for the general public.

The *Book of Thoth* provides a rare look into the ancient Egyptian esoteric tradition. Structured like a dialogue – most likely between the god Thoth (or a 'Master') and a Disciple, known as 'the-one-who-loves-knowledge' – it serves as an initiation text into the sacred knowledge of the scribal tradition. The text covers a wide range of subjects, from practical instruction on how to hold a writing brush, through the symbolic meaning of scribal tools, to a detailed description of sacred geography. It is mentioned that the text was produced within the *House of Life*.

We know very little about these *Houses of Life*, partly due to the secrecy surrounding them and the advice against disclosing their teachings. However, research over the past few decades has

Seated scribe. Egypt, fourth dynasty. Cairo Museum.

confirmed their existence as advanced training centres for a vast array of professions, including scribes, priests, physicians, veterinarians, astronomers, diplomats, translators, musicians, sculptors, architects and poets. It is likely that these centres were the model for the Greek Mystery Schools and philosophical traditions. Their name, *Per-Ankh* (or *Anx*), comes from the hieroglyph combining the symbols for 'house' and the ankh. It is said that they were places where "human beings were brought to life". In Amarna, excavators found a building with bricks stamped with the hieroglyphs for the 'House of Life':

Seal impression with the words pr anx – 'house of life'

The oldest references to a House of Life date from the Old Kingdom (about 2200 BCE). Although only two archaeological sites of the Houses of Life have been identified so far, we know from texts that they existed in many cities, and in the Late Period there may have been a House of Life in each of the main temples throughout Egypt.

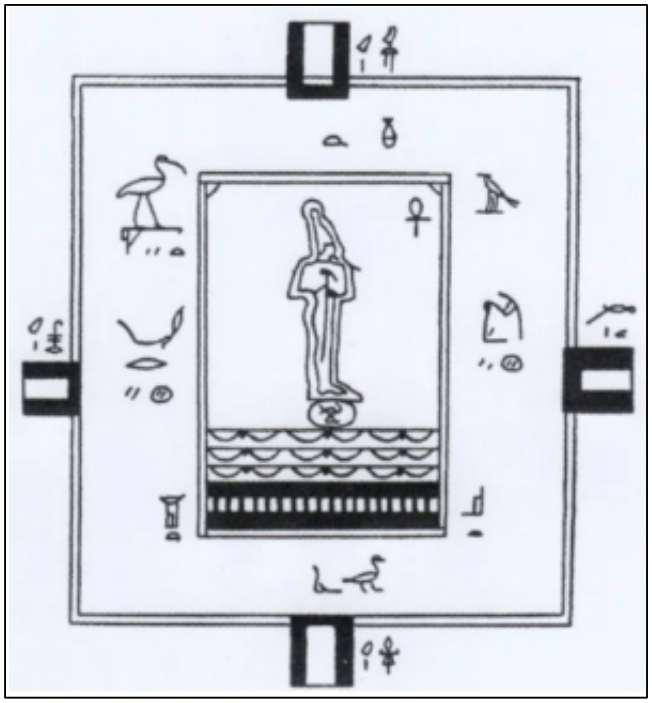
These institutions were integrated into larger temple complexes, or in some cases adjacent to palaces. They can be seen as ancient 'magical-spiritual universities' for the preservation, transmission and creation of knowledge, much like our modern universities, which store, preserve and transmit and create new knowledge through their research and studies.

In the Late Period and the subsequent Greco-Roman Period, the term 'House of Life' may have been used more broadly to refer to a library or a place where papyri were kept. However, this view is too narrow and does not capture their full function. Although they contained a vast collection of papyrus scrolls, they also were a scriptorium and a publishing house where scribes, priests and scholars produced new works and meticulously copied ancient ones to ensure their preservation. Copying ancient texts and producing new ones was a sacred task, because these texts were referred to as the 'Emanations of Ra' ('god's words') and hieroglyphs were understood as imprints of the divine wisdom on earth. By writing, copying and creating sacred texts, the scribes of the House of Life were assisting in maintaining life.

They also had an important magical and ritual function, which was to protect the Heka, the creative force in the world, and to maintain the

Ma'at and the cosmic order by performing rituals. The ancient Egyptians had a profound knowledge and understanding of the spiritual powers that pervade the cosmos. The 'magical' element means that the knowledge they held was not just for academic study but needed, for its full comprehension, to be inwardly explored in the light of each person's own experience and understanding.

The *Papyrus Salt 825*, which is part of the British Museum's collection and one of the few texts that refer directly to the House of Life, contains a



This drawing of a vignette from Papyrus Salt 825 depicts an idealized version of the House of Life, with Osiris in the centre, protected on all sides by Isis, Nephthys, Horus, Thoth, Geb, and Nut. The illustration emphasizes the role of the institution as an Osirian cult place. Image: after A. Gardiner (1938) 'The House of Life', in Journal of Egyptian Archaeology 24: 169

description of the ritual for the "maintenance of life in the world" and the "protection of the image of Osiris from his rebels". The ritual is believed to have been performed to ensure the continued existence and well-being of the cosmos and intended to be performed by a "scribe of the chamber which is called the House of Life." This papyrus provides significant insights into the practices and beliefs of the House of Life and is rich in symbolism. For example, it describes the House of Life as a microcosm of the universe, with its walls representing the deities Isis, Nephthys, Horus and Thoth and its ceiling and floor representing heaven (Nut) and earth (Geb).

There is no doubt that Egypt left an enormous legacy and should rightfully be called the 'cradle of Western Civilization' together with Greece and Rome. It was a culture that combined science, spirituality, art and governance in ways that profoundly influenced the ancient world and continue to resonate today. Its integrated model of holistic education in the Houses of Life could once again inspire us and help us reconnect with elements that we seem to have lost over the last two millennia.

I would like to conclude with a quote from the philosopher and cultural historian Jeremy Naydler, taken from the preface to his book *Temple of the Cosmos. The Ancient Egyptian Experience of the Sacred*:

> "Egypt calls to us like a lost part of ourselves. As we strive to achieve a new sensitivity toward the spiritual powers that pervade our lives, Egypt comes increasingly into focus for us. We find that there is a new and lively dialogue between the unfolding spirituality of modern times and that of the ancient, pre-Greek and pre-Judaic world. [....] For this reason, it is of inestimable value to pursue this dialogue with the ancient Egyptians. For although their era has now passed, they can nevertheless become our companions and guides as we venture toward our own future."

Sabine Leitner

Sir Philip Sidney: Neoplatonist, Cabalist, Hermeticist and Patron of Giordano Bruno

Everyone is probably familiar with the image of the glittering court of Elizabeth I, the 'Virgin Queen' surrounded by glamorous courtiers like Sir Walter Raleigh (founder of Virginia in America, who brought back the potato and tobacco to England) and Sir Francis Drake, whom the Spanish call 'El Drake, the Pirate'.

One of the most dazzling of these courtiers was Sir Philip Sidney, nephew of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, a close friend of Queen Elizabeth I. Both of them were leaders of the Elizabethan Renaissance in the 16th century. But the word 'courtier' does not do justice to Sir Philip Sidney.

He was a brilliant poet, a diplomat who, already at the age of 20, was entrusted with important international missions, and a soldier. Beyond all this he seems to have been that rare thing – a good man. As he lay dying from a battle wound, he is said to have passed his water flask to the soldier lying next to him, saying, "thy need is greater than mine."

Sidney was also the leader of the literary and scientific group known as 'the Sidney Circle', which dominated the court of Queen Elizabeth in its halcyon years. He is described as "erudite, open-minded and generous" – a true Renaissance man.

Elizabeth I and the Three Goddesses, by Hans Eworth (d. 1574). Source Wikimedia.

What many people are not aware of is how this circle, and others like it, were infused with what the scholar Frances Yates calls "The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age."[1] There is an interesting web of connections to support her theory. For example, Dudley was a close friend and powerful protector of John Dee, the famous Elizabethan Magus. In turn, Dee was the mentor of Sir Philip Sidney, who had been his personal pupil. John Dee was so influential that when he published his esoteric work *Monas Hieroglyphica*, Queen Elizabeth asked him to come and explain it to her in person, showing that she had a real interest in these matters.

It was the Sidney Circle that welcomed the occult philosopher Giordano Bruno during his visit to England and devoured his works (he wrote more works in England than anywhere else). The philosophy and ethos of the Sidney Circle was Platonic, Neoplatonic, Hermetic and Cabalistic.

Bruno dedicated two of his Italian works written in London to Sir Philip Sidney: *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*, a critique of Catholic and Protestant religion, which calls for a new world based on virtue; and *The Heroic Frenzies*, a series of allegorical love poems inspired by Neoplatonic ideas and his own concept of the 'heroic philosopher'. You might wonder why works written in Italian would be so popular. The reason was that the Italian language became highly fashionable at Elizabeth's court at this time (because of the Italian Renaissance), so all cultured people knew the language and could read Giordano's works. Sidney himself had studied law in Padua and returned to England full of enthusiasm for Italian Renaissance ideas and poetry.

Bruno met Dudley and Sidney through the French Ambassador in London, at whose house he was staying. It was probably through Dudley (who was chancellor of Oxford University) that Bruno obtained a post there for three months as a lecturer. It was common for the great philosophers of those times to have powerful protectors, without whom they would have quickly fallen victim to the religious authorities, as happened to Bruno at the end, when he was tried for heresy and burned at the stake in 1600.

Another of the leading lights of the Sidney Circle was the poet Edmund Spenser, author of *The Faerie Queene* – an allegorical work celebrating Queen Elizabeth I and exploring the concept of virtue – and also of *The Four Hymns: to Beauty, Love, Heavenly Beauty and Heavenly Love*. He is universally recognized as having been a Neoplatonist, but also a Christian Cabalist. The Cabala describes the ascent and descent of the soul through multiple worlds. The Christian Cabala originated in Italy with Pico della Mirandola and its influence can even be found in the works of the 17th century English poet, John Milton.

Portrait of Philip Sidney (1554-1586). Source Wikimedia

Dame Frances Yates, the great scholar of the influence of the occult philosophy on history, writes that "the Spenserian movement expressed a Renaissance philosophy turned towards Puritan reform and infused with what has been called 'Puritan Occultism'."

Dudley was a leader of the Puritan party, and so was Sidney. We cannot think of either of them as 'classic' Puritans, since they were Elizabethan courtiers. Indeed, there is an interesting painting at Sidney's house, Penshurst Place, where Dudley is

1. Yates, F. *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*. Routledge Classics, London (2001).

Image from Wikimedia.

shown dancing with a lady whom he is lifting high in the air in a very non-puritanical fashion! However, both men promoted moral purity in the sense of the cultivation of virtues. Hence Sidney's patronage of Bruno's book *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*.

This 'Puritan Occultism' was part of the Reformation movement, which was a reaction against the corruption of the Catholic church. As part of this movement, and perhaps even guiding it, John Dee promoted the idea of a 'British Empire' which would lead Protestant Europe against the 'Papal Antichrist'. It is interesting to see these 'occultist' origins of the British Empire, and how that empire developed into something very different in the 19th century. One example of this is that Sir Walter Raleigh, whom we may consider a disciple of John Dee, believed that England could build an empire without the conquest of native peoples, an empire in which English settlers and American Indians would live together, or, alternatively, where natives became allies and England would not interfere with their way of life.[2] How different from what happened later!

However, when Dudley led his troops to defeat in the Netherlands, he fell into disfavour with the queen, and other forces became dominant in England and Europe. After that the dream of a 'puritan occultist' Europe (and world) faded. Dudley was disgraced, Sidney died from a wound sustained in battle, and John Dee lived his last years in dire poverty and neglect at his home in Mortlake (Surrey). Edmund Spenser also died, according to one of his friends, "for want of bread".

The powerful patrons had withdrawn their protection, and the ideal of a peaceful world governed by virtue seemed to vanish like smoke from a fire that no longer burned. According to Frances Yates, however, that fire was merely transferred to other movements[3], with different names, and continued to influence society for the better. If this is true – and Yates's arguments are persuasive – then it gives us hope that the forces of good never give up and never disappear from the face of the earth. And that one day they will succeed in realizing the eternal dream which is so well expressed in some lyrics from Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute*: "Come down, O Peace, return into men's hearts. Then earth will be a paradise again, and mortals will be like gods."

Julian Scott

2. See Walter Ralegh: architect of Empire, by Alan Gallay. Basic Books, New York (2019)

3. See her later book *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*. Routledge Classics, London (2001)

A Nature-Based Approach to Schooling

Growing up in an urban environment and living in one of the busiest cities in the world does not always allow us to connect with Nature in a way that we feel deeply and consciously part of it. And perhaps we don't even notice it as we rush from place to place, become accustomed to the traffic and the noise,

Photo by Caroline Hernandez on Unsplash

surround ourselves with buildings and feel comfortable with indoor settings because they might offer a sense of safety. When I started parenting some years ago, I wouldn't be exaggerating if I said that my whole world turned upside down in terms of what I thought was good, meaningful, healthier. I began to question and challenge many things, including the educational system I was somehow part of with my teaching job. It has been in the past years that I came across a different way of appreciating and acknowledging Nature's role in the learning and development of the human being. And if we look back and study the ancient philosophers, Nature was always present, not necessarily only as a provider but as a key to life.

Forest Schools in the UK seem to be becoming more popular these days, attracting greater numbers with their approach and principles. The six main principles[1] are intertwined and we can get inspired by them because these are ideas that can be applied in other areas and not only in the context of attending a session.

The Long-Term principle: this refers to time, regularity, being in Nature for a longer period and even experiencing the seasons. It reminds us how important it is to avoid the need for quick fixes and short-term results and instead to know that deeper and better results come from a long-term vision, which is something our current generations may lack.

The Nature principle: this is about having a suitable space to foster a relationship with the natural world, interacting with resources and developing an environmental awareness of the impact we have. Although ideally the woodland is the best scenario, sometimes knowing that there is a local park or a community garden can also be an opportunity for exploration.

The Risk principle: this explains the need for taking risks while managing safety and accessing support. It means learning about a risk-benefit process where participants grow in confidence as they attempt those challenging activities. Sometimes we forget how much we used to like climbing trees, digging holes in the ground, hunting minibeasts and being in the presence of fire.

1. https://forestschoolassociation.org/full-principles-and-criteria-for-good-practice/

The Holistic Learning principle: this is about bringing together the different aspects of learning and areas of development, seeing the human being as a whole instead of fragmented. It means not only fostering cognitive skills, but also emotional, communication, social and creative skills. And many other values as well, such as resilience, cooperation, independence and a sense of groundedness.

The Leadership principle: this refers to the qualifications and training required for running sessions, but also to having the attitude of a learner who is in constant learning. Reflecting on what is done and observing carefully in order to make sure the space that is created is safe, nourishing and suitable. I would even add that this principle could embrace the idea of the leader within each of us, awakening the possibility to voice ideas, share and connect.

The Community principle: although in forest schools there is a more learner-centred approach, it also contributes to building a community via shared learning and development. That means considering the learners, their interests and needs, as well as making decisions together, holding dialogues and establishing a sense of the collective. It invites us to go beyond our own selfish tendencies and open our hearts to trust in navigating with others on board.

These principles echo the ideas of many earlier educational thinkers. It is always important to acknowledge the contributions of philosophers, naturalists and educators to what we know today in terms of Forest Schools, so I will briefly mention some of them.

In the 1950s, a Danish woman called Ella Flautau started taking her own children and their friends into the woods daily for play and learning. Many other parents liked the idea and it developed into the first recognized forest kindergarten. The focus was child-led and understanding learning as an outcome of play in the outdoors, regardless of the weather, as well as bringing social skills, resilience and connection to Nature.

In the 1990s, the concept was brought to the UK after British educators had visited Denmark and seen the benefits. From there, the model spread internationally and evolved into the forest school approach we know today.

Another influence came from Kurt Hahn (1886–1974), a German educator who believed that society was playing a role in corrupting young people. He held that young people needed to develop leadership skills, and that outdoor experiences had an important part to play in this. He founded schools where the curriculum emphasizes an experiential approach. Hahn emphasized learning through direct experience, especially in natural environments, rather than only through classroom teaching. He also believed that outdoor challenges help to build resilience, teamwork and moral strength.


Photo by Caroline Hernandez on Unsplash

Another important figure was Susan Isaacs (1885–1948), an English educational psychologist and psychoanalyst, who emphasized the importance of developing independence via play, making adults and/or teachers assume a role of guidance. Her focus was child development, play and exploration; ideas that are embedded in the ethos of forest schools.

In 1989 and with the aim of improving the outcomes in literacy and maths, the national curriculum was introduced in the UK. Before that, teachers used to make the decisions on how and what to teach.

However, as a response and in opposition to this teacher- and outcome-centred approach, other new alternative provisions started to emerge.

Leslie Paul (1905–1985) was an Irish writer and founder of the Woodcraft Folk, whose philosophy gravitates around educating and empowering young ones to become active citizens. His emphasis was on immersion in Nature, child-led exploration, social responsibility and community, and learning through experience. Some of these ideas resonate a lot with the other figures mentioned, and there is an emphasis on promoting activities such as camping, hiking, learning


Photo by Siim Lukka on Unsplash

about Nature, storytelling and cooperative games. These contribute to fostering respect for the natural world, community spirit and democratic values.

Another major influence was Maria Montessori (1870–1952), an Italian doctor and educator who contributed the idea of sensory exploration and allowing children to be free in an environment that has been designed to respond to their needs. Many of her educational principles overlap with and influenced later child-centred approaches, highlighting the need to nourish the child's autonomy and promote hands-on learning.

In the early 21st century, more training became available and Forest Schools started to spread even more. As things developed, more clarity about the expectations was achieved in terms of qualifications, ratio, aims, principles and more. This is the work that the FSA has continued to carry out.

Through the Forest Education Initiative, the Forestry Commission supports research and many networks have been established to assure quality, review processes and consolidate ideas more nationally. The six core principles described earlier were introduced in 2011 and are meant to be of equal importance, so sessions must aim to address them all.

Having experienced the training myself and currently learning more about the positive benefits of offering such an education, brings me some sort of hope that future generations will go back to Nature and find there the answers to many of the questions we are facing today. I can see how different the role of the educator is and how it requires them to accept that they don't have full control or responsibility over the learning. Over the years as an Early Years Teacher and Home Educator, I also found that learning is more likely to happen when children have an interest in and curiosity about a particular topic, rather than following a pre-arranged plan. I keep discovering how fascinating learning can be when children are guiding it somehow, and we are able to guide, support and participate in the learning experience too. Embracing this new way of being a teacher can be hard for some more traditional styles where the adult knows, and the child doesn't. I rather think of learning as a bridge that helps the child access new things, new ideas, new ways of understanding things, but with the child having to walk on that bridge by their own volition. So, if we want children to grow up resilient, creative and deeply connected to life, perhaps the first step is simple: let them return to the woods.

Natalia Lema

Basket of Fruit by Caravaggio (c.1595)

When You look at this painting, what do *YOU* see?

Is it just a depiction of a basket of rotting fruit? Or a philosophical discussion on the fragility of life?

This painting is by one of the greatest artists of the Renaissance in Italy - Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, who depicted images of great realism with emphasis on tonal colour palette, using dark and light. The varied use of light and dark in his paintings captured the quality of a world with no electricity, so candlelight or angled daylight are his way of depicting how dependent we humans are on seeing our world with light.

Caravaggio was active in Rome for most of his artistic life. During the final four years of his life, he moved between Naples, Malta and Sicily. He died in1610 at just 38 years of age. Arrogant, rebellious, a gambler, fighter and fornicator, Knight of Malta and murderer, Caravaggio's short and tempestuous life matched the drama of his works. Characterized by their dramatic, almost theatrical lighting,Caravaggio's paintings were controversial, popular and hugely influential on succeeding generations of painters all over Europe.

To describe his character, a friend of mine said "Good painter, dodgy character" - in a Scottish accent - which is how the art world has generally seen such a troubled but glorious artist. But for

me he is a real challenging and purposeful artist to be admired and emulated.

For Caravaggio, the simplicity of this painting of a basket of fruit and foliage on the verge of decaying offers a profound and deeply questioning view of life as we experience it in our everyday challenges. How are we to see ourselves any different from the fruit or leaves being depicted here? Are we not as fragile in ourselves and just as vulnerable to the bumps and falls in life as they are? And as you consider how life is evolving today, in such turbulence and vulnerability, you question not only yourself and your beliefs, but also the why, and what of any and every decision you have to make, as well as the decision-making of world leaders.

With crises and death on our doorstep, as we experience the natural disasters and man's continued acts of violence against other human beings and nature, this piece of art requires us to continually question our place in the world around us, and our part in its effect on all other life forms and the environment. It challenges us to dwell on deeper thoughts and philosophies as we seek to understand our individual acts and methods of living a good and decent life.

How do you reflect on the philosophies of Plato, Aristotle or any of the great Stoic philosophers when you are visually challenged by such real decay and vulnerability? You have to accept that you are as fragile and vulnerable in your own life.

This illustrates the saying that one bruised fruit will escalate to the whole basket, ending up decaying and rotting them all. It is clearly this that is being depicted here. Just as our life is not independent of all the other life forms on this fragile planet, so too do we need to be cognizant of the existence of the right of all forms of life to flourish.

This is how a great artist can communicate such a meaningful and profound question to each and every viewer of this simple painting. You need to look and really see the true meaning of what the artist is conveying, through pigment on the surface of the painting, to you the viewer, and reflect on your own vulnerability.

Caravaggio is reminding the viewer that they too have a very short time to digest and emulate the great philosophers of the East and West, on how to find a profound and meaningful way to live their lives and to flourish to the fullest, with the knowledge of their fragility and vulnerability in life. For we, just like the fruit, will eventually suffer the bumps and knocks of life, and wither and perish.

So let the painting be a guide to you that your span of fragility and vulnerability will end too. May I hope you flourish and live with a smile and enjoy it to the fullest.

Dave Cole, FRSA

The Mythical Aspect of the Olympic Games

A myth is a traditional story or narrative, usually symbolic in nature, that explains the origin of natural phenomena, historical events, beliefs or cultural customs. Myths often involve gods, heroes and supernatural beings, and are a way in which ancient societies transmitted events that were repeated throughout history and contained profound moral teachings and psychological realities.

Many myths address universal themes such as the creation of the world, life after death or the origin of human beings, and often have a much deeper meaning than what orthodox history and science would have us believe with their dogmas of what is right and wrong, what is true and what is not, what is history and what is mere legend. Myths do not merely record physical facts, but also psychological realities that contain treasures hidden from a purely materialistic view.

With this in mind, I would like to look at the mythical origins of the Olympic Games in ancient Greece.

There are at least eight mythical versions that tell us about the origin of the Olympic Games.

1) The first tells of the five Dactyls, mythical creatures associated with magic, metallurgy and the arts. Their name comes from the Greek *daktylos*, meaning 'finger', because, according to one version of the myth,

Terracotta Panathenaic prize amphora. Image from Wikimedia.

they were born from the fingers of the goddess Rhea (Cybele in other traditions). The Dactyls lived on Mount Ida in Crete or in Phrygia and were considered to be the discoverers of metals and metallurgical techniques such as smelting and forging. There were five of them: Herakles (not to be confused with the hero of that name), Acmon, Damnameneus, Celmis and Delas, each of them responsible for one part of the smelting and forging process.

These five Dactyls were considered minor deities or daemons, semi-divine beings who inspired respect and fear. In addition to metallurgy, they were also associated with magic and initiation rites, becoming key figures in the development of ancient arts and techniques in craft guilds. They took care of the infant Zeus so that Cronus would not find him, leaving Crete and arriving in Olympia.

To commemorate the success of their endeavour, they ran a race, the first to be held in that sacred place. The Dactyl Herakles was the winner, and to remember his victory, he decided that a commemorative race would be held every four years, not in his honour, but in honour of the infant Zeus.

2) According to another version, the last battle of the war of Zeus against the Titans of Cronus took place in Olympia. Zeus defeated his father, and in memory of this victory, the hill overlooking the sanctuary was named after him. It was then decided that the site would become known as Olympia and that a race would be held to commemorate his victory over the Titans.

3) Some time later, a Cretan named Clymenus arrived in the region and recreated the first race held by the Dactyls, an interesting fact, as it is the second tradition linking Crete to the origin of the games.

4) The region of Elis was ruled by King Endymion, who had three sons. As he loved all his sons equally, he was unsure which one to name as his heir. He proposed that they race at Olympia to choose the best. The winner of this contest was Epeus.

5) A fifth version tells us that the sanctuary of Olympia was controlled by the king of Pisa, Enomaos. This king had only one daughter, Hippodamia, whom he had promised to marry to whoever could defeat him in a chariot race. However, whoever lost ended up being killed. Many suitors fell under Enomaos's spear, until the hero Pelops arrived in the country.

Tantalus, Pelops's father, was a king who had enjoyed the favour of the gods, who even invited him to their banquets. However, Tantalus committed one of the greatest atrocities in mythology: to test whether the gods were truly omniscient, he decided to kill his son Pelops and serve him as food at a banquet to which he had invited the gods.

Pelops and Hippodamia. Image from Wikimedia.

Upon discovering the crime, the gods revived Pelops and reconstructed him. It is said that Demeter, distracted by the pain of losing her daughter Persephone, ate a piece of his shoulder before realizing what she was eating. When the gods brought Pelops back to life, they replaced the missing part with a piece of ivory, giving him a divine mark.

As an adult, Pelops travelled to Pisa, where he fell in love with Hippodamia, the daughter of King Enomaos. To win her hand in marriage, he had to defeat Enomaos in a chariot race, a dangerous challenge for which the king had already killed several suitors.

In the end, the hero won and married the princess, and to commemorate his victory, he founded the first Olympic Games, while Hippodamia established the Heraic Games (dedicated to the goddess Hera).

Pelops had a monumental tomb in Olympia where he was worshipped; in addition, the rich pediment of the great temple of Zeus was decorated with a sculptural group depicting the scene of the chariot race between Pelops and Enomaos.

6) However, there was a sixth version of the origins of the games that was more widely accepted among the Greeks themselves. This version is related to one of the labours of Herakles, when the hero went to Elis to clean the stables of King Augeas.

Heracles and Athena. Image from Wikimedia

The king promised him a share of his abundant livestock in exchange for cleaning the stables. Herakles managed to wash away the filth from the stables by diverting the courses of the rivers Alpheus and Peneus, but when he appeared before Augeas to claim his payment, the king refused, claiming that it was the rivers that had done the work for Herakles. The hero left in a rage, only to return shortly afterwards at the head of a large army. The war ended in favour of Herakles, who, in honour of his father Zeus, restored the sporting competitions held at the sanctuary of Olympia and planted in the sacred enclosure the sapling of an olive tree he had brought from the land of the Hyperboreans.

7) A seventh myth tells that the games founded by Herakles fell into oblivion and were not restored until, several generations later, the Eleans returned to the Peloponnese and recovered Elis, where the sanctuary of Olympia was located, which came under the control of Oxylus, who restored the foot races held to honour Zeus.

8) The eighth and final version lies somewhere between myth and history, sometime between the 9th and 8th centuries BC. At this time, the region of Elis was struck by a terrible disease, and its king, a descendant of Oxylus named Iphitus, went to the Oracle at Delphi to learn the will of the gods and find a way to save the country. The Pythia told him: "Defend your homeland: stay away from war, take care of your common friendship with the Hellenes, while the year of joy is added to your annual games."

This was interpreted by Iphitus as meaning that he should establish a truce between the Hellenes and restore the ancient games founded by Herakles. He also revealed that he would find a very old olive tree in the sanctuary of Olympia, which Herakles himself had planted and which was now covered with cobwebs. From the branches of this olive tree, henceforth called Kalistephanos, 'the one with the beautiful crowns', the crowns that the Olympic winners would wear as a symbol of victory were to be made.

Iphitus returned to Elis knowing that it would be very difficult to convince the Greeks to cease their constant conflicts. He sought the help of Cleomenes of Pisa, a city that at that time controlled the sanctuary of Olympia, and that of Lycurgus of Sparta, a famous lawgiver who had achieved great fame among the Hellenes for the laws he had created for the Lacedaemonians. Iphitus, Cleomenes and Lycurgus not only succeeded in restoring the Olympic Games, but also convinced the rest of Hellas to set aside their differences during the games and compete peacefully for glory that could now be achieved without taking up arms. At that moment, the Ekecheiria or sacred truce was born.

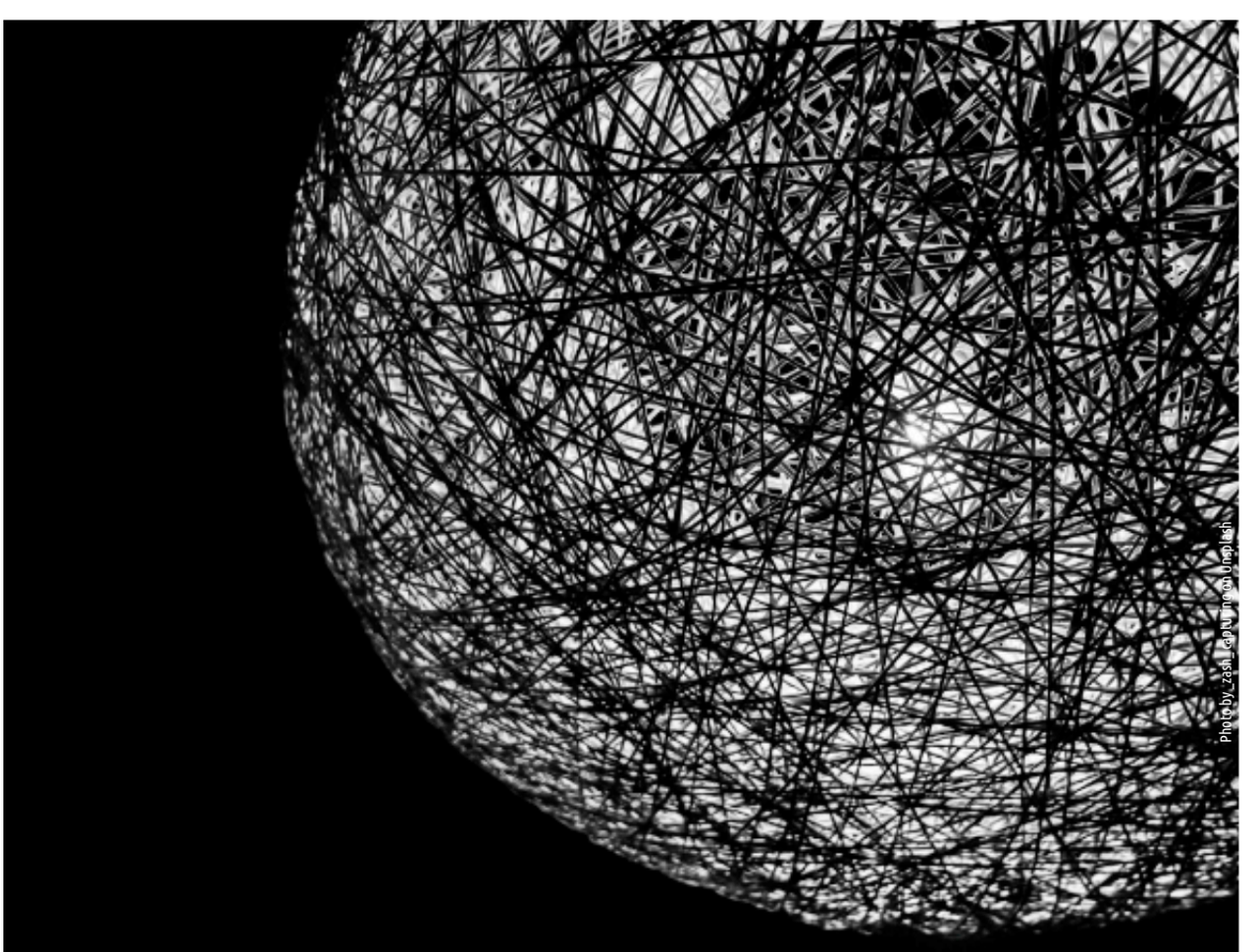
Excerpted and abridged from a forthcoming book on the Olympic Games by Paco Iglesias, International Director of the New Acropolis School of Sport

THINKING IN SYSTEMS

In her book *Thinking in Systems* published posthumously, Donella H. Meadows, co-author of the ground-breaking *The Limits to Growth* (1972), shows us a different, yet not so new, way of looking at reality – a reality where all organisms, large and small, can be seen as systems, meaning that nothing in the universe truly works in isolation. It is an approach that brings modern science and ancient wisdom closer together.

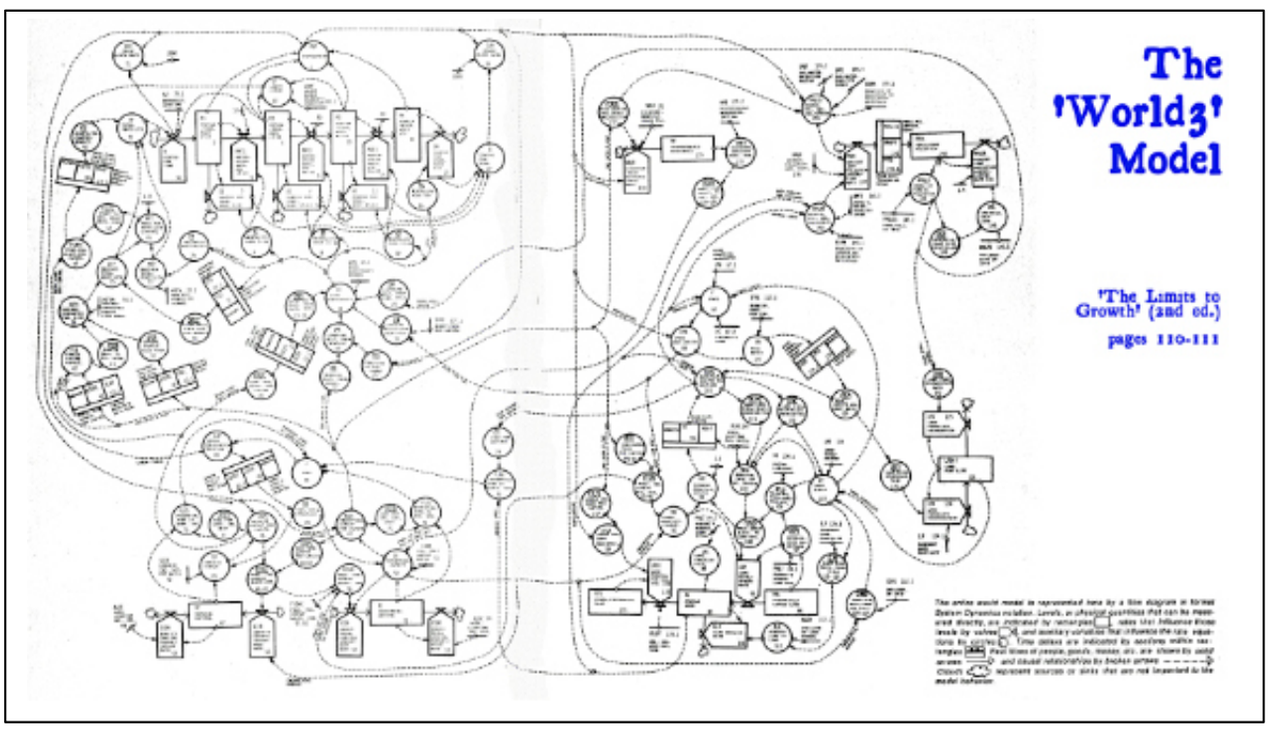
Her description of systems includes all structures that work with stocks, flows and retroaction loops. Such systems can be anything from living organisms to galaxies and can describe small communities, nation states or societies. Systems can be quantified using models, which are scientific and mathematical ways of describing reality. For example, the World3 model used in *The Limits to Growth* was supposed to simulate the relationship through time between five variables: population, food production, industrialization, pollution and consumption of non-renewable resources.

If we take population as an example, we can see how the population of a species can be modelled with the inflow of births and the outflow of deaths.



The flow of births is controlled by the fertility rate, and the flow of deaths by the mortality rate. Feedback loops can help improve the fertility rate by using contraception or various social policies, and the mortality rate can be improved by better health and social care.

But models, even the most advanced ones, can never describe reality as a whole and need to be constantly improved and modified. They can, however, simulate the non-linear behaviour of systems to some extent.



The World3 model with its many stocks, flows and feedback loops.

This is very important, as all systems have thresholds, peaks and collapses. A system might respond to a linear setting change in a linear way, for a short time, until a threshold is attained. Understanding systems is important, as we can help correct them if they start malfunctioning. We can check feedback loops: are they functioning properly? Is there good communication within the system that reports when stocks are too low, or flows are too high? Are the sources feeding the systems renewed or even renewable? Is the flow much higher than the stock can sustain?

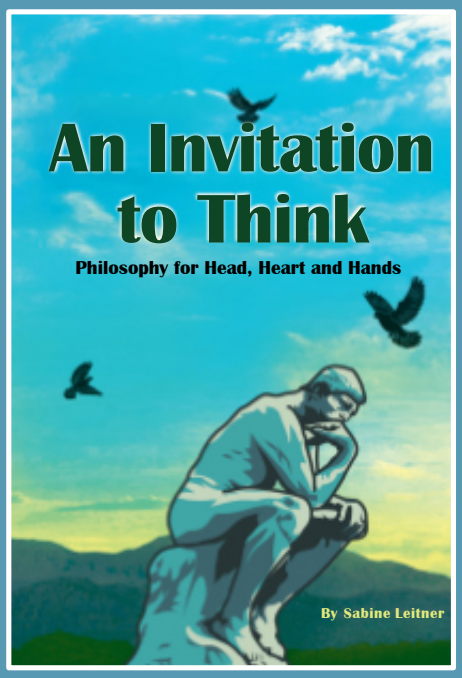
More impactful ways of changing a system are the goals: complex systems, with subsystems, might have different goals. Maybe the common goal has changed or shifted far from the original.

Meadows emphasizes that the way one can act on a malfunctioning system can vary greatly, depending on whether we focus on the symptoms or the cause. Focusing on symptoms or measured variables indicating quantity rather than quality can be as useful as arranging deckchairs on the Titanic as it sinks.

A more effective way of changing a system can be by modifying the organizing structure or unifying the goals. As human beings we use paradigms, stories and myths to make sense of the world around us. Such ideals can be quite detached from the reality of the system. Paradigms or concepts are manmade, therefore flawed, and can be improved. Ultimately there are no absolute paradigms that can explain everything in their entirety.

There are no paradigms that are above the truth or an objective reality, just as there are no models that can describe reality with absolute accuracy. Thinking in systems is not the solution to everything, but it might get us closer to seeing what connects us with the whole.

Florimond Krins



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by Sabine Leitner

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About the Author

For nearly 30 years, Sabine Leitner has been Director of New Acropolis in London – a school of philosophy in the classical tradition, dedicated to reviving philosophy in its original sense, as the love of wisdom and the integration of theory with practice. Alongside her leadership of the school, Sabine has worked as a German teacher in secondary schools while gaining MAs in Philosophy and Organizational and Leadership Coaching, as well as a Counselling Diploma from the Institute of Psychosynthesis.

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