

# **On the Edge of Abundance**

**Making Sense of  
What's to Come**

**Ulrich Golüke**

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# A Work of Imagination

*This present moment  
Used to be  
The unimaginable future*

*Stewart Brand, The Clock of the Long Now,  
Basic Books*

*Never predict anything - Especially the future*

*Samuel Goldwyn*

## Preface

A recent article in *U.S. News and World Report* brings this book nicely to the point: “Why doesn’t progress add up to satisfaction?” Or, as I would put it, “Why does civilization only end up giving us headaches?” The answer is not a joke, but deceptively simple: We are wearing the wrong glasses through which we try to make sense of what goes on around us. The wrong glasses? Yes, figuratively speaking.

Humans have always pondered five big and age-old questions: “Will I have to go to sleep hungry because there is no food?”, “Who am I?”, “How do I behave?”, “What is my purpose?” and “What do I leave behind?”. Those are the questions of subsistence, identity, relation, purpose and legacy. They are age-old because they have always been with us, and chances are, they will also be with us in the future.

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In one way or the other we have been able to answer them, in order to keep our sanity. To do so, we have constructed world-views, frames—glasses, if you will—through which we interpreted what went on around us. Historically and culturally independent, there have been four: the heroic, religious, scientific and economic frames.

It is within these frames that we answered the five big questions: in the context of our lives, which most of the time was material poverty, often abject misery. We died often, young and randomly: from hunger, from inexplicable disease, from violence and war. And since that context did not change for thousands of years, we developed lasting answers that made sense relative to that context. But in the last fifty years or so, that

context has changed, radically. And just as swim vests are of very limited use in a desert, so our earlier answers are of little use in the world we live in now. No wonder, we are anxious, lost and confused—and get headaches.

The book unravels the mystery of the new context—where it comes from, what it looks like, what it feels like and of ways of creating it ourselves. It is about the new language and concepts we need in it, and about some of the implications for us as humans: alone, in groups, in organizations and in businesses. It is about what will matter more and what will matter less in the future.

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The book is personal. I was raised by two people—my parents—who still had first hand experience of hunger and deprivation, of lack and poverty, of misery and hard work. As I am about to turn fifty, I live a life where I have never needed to pay attention to where my next meal would come from, where, when I am ill, I go to the doctor, fully expecting to be cured and being able to afford the service, and where the age-old purpose in life—that I will provide my children with an easier life than I had—is no longer true.

The motivation, then, is intensely personal; I would like to make sense of my life. But I have also met many people, young and old, male and female, rich and poor, who are similarly lost and puzzled, and my aim is to set out—not the answers, for that is and remains a personal task—but to offer my reflections about the context, the language and the implications of the worlds to come.

Take time and enjoy—and read slowly!

*Brione / Verzasca, Winter 2000 - 2001*

# The Hunger in Our Souls

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*Und die Wahrheit gilt auch dann schon,  
selbst wenn keiner sie erkennt.*

*(The truth is valid,  
even if no one recognizes it yet)*

*Udo Lindenberg, Gustav*

*It's not over 'til it's over*

*Maine saying*

# Frameworks

*A man hears what he wants to hear  
and disregards the rest.*

*Simon and Garfunkel, The Boxer*

*Paradigms only change at funerals*

*Anonymous*

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*A long time ago, there was a father and a son. Since birth, the son had had an eye problem, which meant that he saw everything double. But since that was what he'd always seen, he had adjusted well, never complained, and his father never made a big deal about it. Except one night, when they were standing outside, watching a most beautiful moon rise. And the father said: "You know, at times like this, I really feel so sad about your eye problems." "What do mean, 'sad about my eye problems'?" the son asked. "Well, you know that you see everything double. And seeing such a magnificent moon rise, it must be hard not to see the full beauty of it. To see it blurred and double," the father replied. "You are wrong, father. I do not see everything double", the son replied, "because if I did, I would see four moons rising."*

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This book is about unraveling mysteries: how we look at the world; whether the way we do look still makes sense; how else we could look; and what we would see if we did? In a sense, it is about the glasses we wear; why we get headaches; and if different glasses might get rid of the pain. We do need glasses—frames—in order to simplify what goes on around us, so that we can attend to the important things in life. If we did not have a frame, a filter, we would go crazy, quite literally. Schizophrenia is the medical term we use to describe a person's inability to prioritize stimuli—noise, smell, color, and movement—entering our brain<sup>1</sup>. So a frame is not only a convenience to have, it is absolutely essential.

And yet...

16 Just as we get into real trouble when we put on our reading glasses when we drive, we need to be quite careful to use the right frame for the right purpose. We all know how embarrassing it can be to be in a country where we do not understand the local frame, i.e. the local language. Even when we do, differences between culture and outlook sometimes trip us up. The British and the Americans have a delightful quip for that: They call each other at times 'separated by a common language'.

The separation from looking at the world through different glasses goes much further, though. Men are supposed to be from Mars and women from Venus. Whether true or not, that assertion has sold a lot of books. Young and old, teenager and parent, bosses and workers, gross national product and ecology, believer and non-believer, Catholics and Protestants, Muslims and Christians, them and us. The list goes on and on; perhaps you already sense what it leads to: right and

1 <http://www.psychlaws.org/GeneralResources/Fact5.htm>

wrong! And we usually do not say that my way of looking at things—my frame—is right and your way of looking at things—your frame—is wrong. We abbreviate: I am right and you are wrong! And on a good day we add: and as civilized people let's agree to disagree.

I am my frame, and that's the way it is—as long as you live in my house, you do as I tell you. And if we are feeling very compassionate, we say: "If you would only love me, you would agree with me."

That is merely to suggest to you that frames become habits and habits, repeated often enough, become the Truth.

But what if we are wrong? What if we do drive with our reading glasses on? What if the fuzzy outlines we see are really not fuzzy outlines, but the wrong frame? I am asking you in this book to consider the possibility that a frame we have become very familiar with, in fact we have elevated to the Truth, maybe nothing more than that: a frame. Convenient, even essential for a time, but now no longer as useful as it once was. In fact, giving us headaches now. But because it is a habit, a Truth, we are unable to grasp that we could replace it. We act as if it was a part of us, not merely a way of looking at the world, a fancy set of glasses.

The frame I am talking about is scarcity: our habit of looking at the world as one gigantic setup to manage our access—fairly, or more often not—to scarce resources, things, goods, products and services; and the power that went with that.

In this book I recount how I became convinced that scarcity no longer helps us to make sense, no longer helps us to find answers to the big ques-

tions in our lives. I argue in this book that scarcity is but a frame, one we need to exchange for a more useful one. To do that, I need your help and ask you to do two things:

- 1) that you entertain the possibility that frames—at times—are variables, and
- 2) that a possible replacement for scarcity is abundance, the state, as the dictionary tells us, of having more than enough.

I am asking you, in short, to suspend your disbelief for the duration of the book. If you do that, I will in turn

- 1) take the time to contrast scarcity and abundance and see how they fare in helping us answer the questions that give meaning to our lives: Will I have enough to eat? Who am I? How do I behave? What am I here for? What will I leave behind? This is done in the next chapter “Big Questions—Big Answers”,
- 2) take you on a tour of a world that uses abundance, rather than scarcity, as the big organizing principle. This world, admittedly, does not yet exist in its full splendor—so it is mostly a thought experiment. But it exists—and has existed—in enclaves, in fragments and I will refer to some of those. This I begin in the chapter called “Take a Walk on the Wild Side”,
- 3) try to bring all these speculations together in a chapter called “The New Meaning of Life”. Here I will talk about the motivations of this new world that unfolds when you look through a frame of abundance,
- 4) tell, in part II, vignettes of abundant lives of persons and organizations, not as a detailed

guide, but to inspire you to experiment: take off your scarcity frames and replace them with abundance frames, for shorter or for longer periods, and look at the people you know, the groups, organizations and businesses you are a part of and ask yourself: What do I see?

- 5) end, in a very short part III, with a reflection of the new additional skills we need to be working on for this new frame.

Just like wearing the wrong glasses gives you headaches, using the wrong frame constrains you, unnecessarily. And how do we know we have the right frame? There is a profoundly simple answer and a profoundly mystical one. First the simple one.

Malcolm Gladwell in his book “The Tipping Point”<sup>2</sup> talks about how systems sometimes change dramatically, ‘tip’ in his words, for no apparent dramatic reason. My feeling is that this is what is happening to us in this change from scarcity to abundance. Throughout history humans have lived in structures in which, at best, one in ten thousand lived a life of abundance, i.e. had more than enough. In the last one hundred years, this number changed to one in six—and the system ‘is tipping’ from being focused on scarcity to one focused on abundance—and we are tipping with it.

I argue that this matters, profoundly. Others have and will argue that this is not so—rather than being content with two hundred square meters of living space, we will ‘evolve’ to needing four hundred or a thousand square meters. A recent article in US News and World Report “Pursuing

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<sup>2</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, 2000, *The Tipping Point*, Little Brown & Company; ISBN: 0316316962

# Big Questions & Big Answers

Good frames are meant to help us make sense. Of what, exactly? Of the questions we have. And for the biggest, deepest and most fundamental questions we have and we all, rich or poor, old or young, man or woman would like an answer to, we need a big frame. What are those questions?

Taking my cue from the religions of the world, from Joseph Campbell's work<sup>3</sup>, from Abraham Maslow's<sup>4</sup> work, and after talking with hundreds of people, my list of the five big questions of life is this:

- 1) Will I have enough to eat or will I starve?  
**Subsistence**
- 2) Who am I? **Identity**
- 3) How do I behave? **Relation**
- 4) What am I here for? **Purpose**
- 5) What do I leave behind? **Legacy**

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There are, of course, countless others, like "Does she love me?", "Will I get promoted?", "Should I eat this piece of chocolate?" but I suggest they are subsidiary to the five big ones—they matter less.

My list of questions is not new, big questions never are—they are big precisely because they are age-old. And they are 'frame independent'. This simply means that these questions are important regardless of where and how you live. A king needs to find answers, just as a pauper; a cave

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3 especially Joseph Campbell, 1993, *Myths to Live by*, Arkana; ISBN: 0140194614

4 Abraham Maslow, 1998, *Maslow on Management*, Wiley, NY ISBN 0471247804

woman just as a fashion model; a chief executive officer just as a night watchman; a saint just as a sinner. The questions are timeless. They are raised by children everywhere as they grow up and by people getting ready to die. They are raised by people of all cultures and all stations in life. Thus, chances are they tell us something about the humanness of us, about human nature.

If these are the questions that matter, then the frames we use to find answers to them also matter. And before we venture into the future, let's look at the past: What were the frames we used to make sense of life? According to Betty Sue Flowers<sup>5</sup>, there were four big and distinct frames we had:

- the hero frame
- the religious frame
- the scientific frame and
- the economic frame.

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What answers did they lead us to? Before I take you on a little tour through these, past, worlds it is important to realize that although they are very loosely chronological, there is much overlap, even to this day, between them. What is more, sometimes they coexist—and we ourselves sometimes have one foot in one frame and the other foot in quite another. This causes much confusion.

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5 Betty Sue Flowers uses these headings, but the questions she raises and the answers she gives differ from mine. However, we do agree that the questions and answers are about the conversations between God, Nature and Man. Her work is available as *The Economic Myth*, Center for International Business Education and Research, Graduate School of Business, University of Texas at Austin, 1995. [monograph]

# Skills of Abundance

*When it's time, it's time*

*Maine saying*

*Es geschieht nichts Gutes,  
Außer: man tut es*

*(Nothing good happens,  
Except, when you do it)*

*Erich Kästner, Moral, Lyrische Hausapotheke*

Just as an agricultural world values different skills from an industrial one, an abundant world will emphasize different skills and tools from those of a scarce world. In hindsight, the world we are leaving behind will look and feel simple. Partly because we have spent quite a considerable time with scarcity—we have even created a science, albeit a dismal one, to help us deal with it. But the main reason for the simplicity of the past is that a new frame which contains the old one, needs to be more complicated: after all, it explains the past, as a special case, as well as something in addition. Einstein's physics is also decidedly more complicated than Newton's. The 'something else' an abundant frame needs to help us with is identity, relation, purpose and legacy.

Together with that expansion goes a shift in kind: subsistence, at the end of the day, is about material constraints and how to remove them. Hence the value of science, logic and confrontation to this world. Abundance is about a different constraint: meaning. Or, as a friend once put it: "getting by is not in question. Finding a reason to get by is what is now elusive". The good news is that removing meaning constraints does not increase

our physical impact—we will not once again have to use as much physical energy as we did in all the rest of human history put together. Luckily, because we may very well not have that much left.

The bad news, for us, is that it requires holistic and inductive skills. We have to become much more aware of the impact of our thoughts and actions, not just on our loved ones, but the multitudes of humanity. Before we think and before we do.

162 Scarcity allowed us to reduce all questions of identity, relation, purpose and legacy, even love, to the one metric: does it help me survive or does it not? What little ethical and value based conversations we needed (or could afford?) we quite sensibly outsourced: to shamans, priests, artists, gurus or professors of bioethics. Abundance removes that constraint and the freedom to let others worry about cloning, euthanasia and immigration. Whether we like it or not, we all need to become skilled at creative conversations about identity, relation, purpose and legacy in addition to, not instead of, all the skills we acquired in thousands of years of scarcity.

Here are some ideas.

### **Stories**

The first order of business in a world of abundance is identity

- to know who are, what you need and what your task really is
- to help others find out who they are
- to handle how that sense of self changes over time, and



— how to ‘negotiate’ clashes, alliances and ‘joint ventures’ of identities.

Luckily, we have a tool ready at hand: stories. Every father and every mother uses that vehicle to introduce the shades of gray, and some color that make up most of our lives to their children. But our stories so far are simple ones, and often only one-dimensional. They are merely told, not created, and they are not created in groups. Identity often makes us think only of individuals, but groups also need to have identities. Group identity, for example, will become the key attribute of commercial entities in abundance. Since all material constraint removing aspects have become commoditized, the identity (do not mistake that for the brand—identity contains brand as my personality contains my facial features) of a group, a firm or organization is what decides acceptance or rejection, success or failure, life and death. And identities are, as Oliver Sacks reminds us, stories about the self, as told to others. Story creation—already used sporadically under the name scenario exercises—will become the key knowledge management technique. So, invest in it in becoming better!

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### ***Systems thinking***

The most persuasive and passionate plea—if you are an engineer—for the need to think routinely in complete systems terms is Dietrich Dörner's book “The Logic of Failure”<sup>34</sup>. For the non-engineers, or those who've never seen a passionate engineer, let me try to put the plea this way: Take global warming. No less a skeptic than *The Economist* says that global warming is real and warrants global action. So, as a faithful reader of *The Econ-*

34 Dietrich Dörner, 1996, *The Logic of Failure*, Perseus Books, New York

omist you want to do your share, but you conclude quickly that, relative to the size and sheer intractability of the issue, no matter what you do as a private person does not matter at all. And yet, what six billion people do, does matter and in a real sense is the problem. Traditional tools, deductive in nature, do not manage to bridge the gap that you as one person do not matter but you as one of six billion do. Systems tools manage this trick, not effortlessly, but they do.

Just as hunters & gatherers in the end had to go to law school to learn how to settle disputes over private property that a farming way of life created, so do we have to enroll in systems thinking schools. Go and sign up.

### ***Gaming as Learning***

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In a world of scarcity, the vast bulk of learning was to match an answer with a question. Finding the answer in the first place was left to the minor and major geniuses. And once one of those truly smart ones found an answer, the rest of us just needed to repeat it. In abundance, since we are no longer preoccupied with material constraints, learning becomes more like finding entirely new answers, and sometimes even entirely new questions. For this we need inductive, playful and pattern recognition skills, not rote learning. And those are the skills of *Homo Ludens*, not *Homo Faber*. Again, the task will be easier than it looks at first: we all have employed—usually very successfully—this method in the first few years of our lives. It is only when we enter formal schooling all the way to those executive retreats at Harvard that we let those skills atrophy.

The communication infrastructure we are currently building has as one of its often overlooked side benefits a game market of substantial magnitude and growth. We are also seeing the first tentative examples of merging customer and business development with business and play.

But play is more than simply releasing intellectual reserves. Games are known in every culture as safe spaces to test and develop identities and relations. Signs are everywhere: We dive for a week although we are far from a passionate or professional diver. The same works for hiking, mountain climbing, sailing, dancing, etc. etc. 'It is only a game' is one of the few spaces we have left to be able to look like a fool—without consequences. Which is why business games in corporations often do not work: everybody knows it is not really a game and you are being watched very, very carefully.

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### ***Humor***

Humor will come into its own in an abundant world. We'll use it as a way to define our identity, as a way to relate and for some of us, to make someone else laugh may well become our purpose.

It will be tricky for a while, since most humor is confrontational in our world. How could it be otherwise? Scarcity is about winning and losing, and if the law restricts me from hitting you on the head, at least I can make you look like a fool. Try to pay attention sometime to how much of our humor—also in advertising—is at the expense of someone else. A good way to start to change this is to make fun at yourself (this also avoids most, if not all, of the cross-cultural faux-pas that you

never even know you are committing). Laughing at you yourself will also do wonders for your relations.

## **Values**

The four questions about identity, relation, purpose and legacy have, at least as I can see, no god-given absolute answers. At the very edges, I believe, there is a right and a wrong, a truth and a falsehood, a black and a white, but most of our lives take place in the gray in between. The need to focus on subsistence has in the past given those answers, all the way to the ends justifying the means. That simplicity is over. As part of our answers, alone and with others, the questions of

Who am I?

How do I behave?

What am I here for?

What do I leave behind?

we need to find, use and hone our very own moral compass. Sounds harder than it is. When we do something we should not do, we generally know, but often, far too often we do not listen—believe me, I know the feeling. Start to listen. Do not try to go from sinner to saint in one big step, pick three things you will do more of, three you will do less of and three you feel pretty right about. Do it alone and or with others, as is your habit. Watch your self, revise, add to and delete from the list.

If you are lost and do not know where to start, have a look at the basic texts of any of the great religions. Beware that many roads lead to wisdom, and if this is not yours, then serve, selflessly. Antoine Saint Exupéry in his book “Flight

to Arras”<sup>35</sup> once wrote that he only existed in the web of relationships that connected him with others. You weave and strengthen that web by giving, by serving others. Only a few of us will wish to compete with Mother Teresa, but all of us can ask, how does my action, my words and my emotions help this other person in his or her quest to find their answers to the questions of identity, relation, purpose and legacy—as well as subsistence. Mr. Subiah, the chairman of the Indian Murrugappa group once told me: “The only transactions worth engaging in are those where both parties benefit.”

### ***Practice Dilemmas***

As we spend more time with questions of identity, relation, purpose and legacy, dilemmas will arise that cannot be resolved objectively with a scientific experiment, or a statement from the Pope or the Supreme Court. Spend time with these dilemmas long before they become matters of life and death. Then you are ready when they do. Discover, nurture and reveal your ability to walk in someone else’s shoes—for a while. Find out how ‘negotiable’ your identity really is. Where are your thresholds of discomfort, pain and withdrawal. In a world of no ‘away’ anymore, to agree to disagree is, at best, a temporary solution. Practice to go deeper, to a concept or an arrangement that shifts the focus from confrontation to creativity, growing and healing—together. And do not forget to start with easy dilemmas.

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35 Antoine de St. Exupéry, op. cit.

## ***Shift to your heart***

The mind has had a good run for the last few hundred years. This makes sense, because the mind is simply very good when we have to remove material constraints. But, to say it one more, last time, we have removed the material constraints. Now we embark on a road to tackle the meaning constraints, exploring the questions of identity, relation, purpose and legacy. On this playing field the mind will play a subsidiary role; critical, yes, but subsidiary to the heart, the emotions and the values.

Remember, the stone age did not end because of the lack of stones!

Have faith—and follow your heart.

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It's time.

*I like your act, but don't give up your day job*

*Anonymous*

*Never predict anything, especially the future*

*Samuel Goldwyn*

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