

Book Review

Maureen O'Hara & Graham Leicester

Dancing at the Edge: Competence, Culture and Organization in the 21st Century
Axminster, United Kingdom: Triarchy Press, 2012

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

There are, it is commonly said, two kinds of people in this world: those who think that there are two kinds of people, and those who don't.

An inveterate foe of simplicity and an advocate of almost endless ambiguity, I fall heavily into the second camp. Nonetheless, I also acknowledge that small numbers have a certain expediency. "Three" is especially good for purposes of bringing things together into a comfortable whole (Lease, 1919). It famously forms the spiritual Christian "trinity" (Father, Son and Holy Spirit). It outlines the Weberian analysis of authority (traditional, charismatic and rational-legal), the Freudian approach to the *psyche* (id, ego and superego) and Kohlberg's ascending ladder of morality (pre-conventional, conventional and post-conventional). It can be found in various manifestations of the occult, e.g., MacBeth's three witches), but it shows up in Habermas' roster of human knowledge (historical-hermeneutic, empirical-analytical and emancipatory) and Trow's postsecondary educational landscape (elite, mass, universal). Three makes matters all very tidy and excludes as much haziness and as many alternative explanations and descriptions as possible, while also providing at least the illusion manageability, if not total truth and wisdom. Personally, although I prefer the Scottish options in criminal trials (guilty, innocent and "unproven") to the O. J. Simpson coin flip of guilty versus not guilty), I pretty much restrict my affection for three to the theory of intransitive preference—nicely demonstrated in the theory of intransitive preference and expressed in the children's game of paper, scissors, stone.

More than three becomes complicated. Five-stage models are not too unwieldy as Kübler-Ross's stages of grief and Maslow's well-known hierarchy of human needs (in which, O'Hara and Leicester assure us, even Maslow didn't believe) demonstrate; they do, however, require some focus and concentrated attention to get them right and in the right order. So, except for various twelve-step self-help programs, it seems best to keep things simple. (Buddhism, with its four noble truths, five paths, and so on may constitute a splendid exception to all this ...)

When such elegance as "three" provides is deemed unnecessary, of course, we often try to reduce complexities to bipolar, mutually exclusive pairs: the Taoist yin and yang, Kierkegaard's either/or, the ancient Manichean heresy of the war between the immovable object of good and the irresistible force of evil, the modern split between the arts and the sciences or the more enduring and even more toxic Cartesian dichotomy between mind and body. Mostly, however, setting up polar opposites creates more problems than it solves; in the case *Dancing on the Edge*, however, I think we can get away with it. In any case, I shall try.

When looking at social problems or “challenges,” in today’s almost compulsory corporate happy talk, there are two ways to approach a topic: from the inside (social-psychological) and from the outside (political-economic). Since addressing questions of interest to inherently self-interested corporate entities—both public and private—can lead to the possibility of dangerous self-questioning and examining too seriously critics of the bureaucracy involved, it is always best to avoid the “big” questions and concentrate on the specific. When, however, this doesn’t work because the size, complexity and urgency of the issues involved are too pressing, the next best thing is to bring up the question of inevitable, unavoidable and certainly irreversible change. No one need get too precise about the origins, dynamics, directions and ultimate consequences of ubiquitous and pervasive change; it is usually enough to attribute it to some recognizable abstraction such as “technology” or “culture” in order to focus attention on “adaptability” and thus turn the discussion into a matter of individual or definable group response.

Maureen O’Hara is a licensed psychotherapist and long-time collaborator of Carl Rogers. She teaches at National University, one of the largest private, non-profit-universities in the United States, which is situated just south of Orange County in the most expensive residential zone in the USA. Her co-author, Graham Leicester, has worked with the World Bank Institute, headed Scotland’s “leading think tank,” the Scottish Council Foundation and is current director of International Futures Forum which has the mission of supporting “a transformative approach to the challenges of the times.” We may be forgiven for expecting a good deal from such high fliers. And a good deal is what we get.

They start with a profile of the “persons of tomorrow.” The twentieth century, it seems, looked for people with specific skills; the twenty-first will require people who are adaptable, possessing “competencies” that cannot be measured “in the abstract” and are not susceptible to written exams. The twentieth-century was built by individuals; the twenty-first century will require teamwork and collaboration. Finally, the twentieth century is said to have presumed that competencies could be discretely defined, acquired alone and learned sequentially; in the new age, we (or those of us who are successful) will reveal the holistic nature of our inner essence and meet complexity with our innate capacities, suitably nourished, that “are already part of our rich human repertoire, but undervalued, underestimated and so underdeveloped in our late modern culture.”

As required for such transformative steps, O’Hara and Leicester begin the meat of the text by confirming that we live in tremulous times. Crises in governance, economics and ecology, they say, foretell “powerful times.” We have already seen the results when the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the decline of the British Empire produced “identity” problems. Moving on, seemingly oblivious to the Holocaust, the rise and fall of Stalinism and Maoism, the threat of atomic warfare and climate change; they mention the warnings of the Club of Rome but note also that corporate futurist Peter Drucker was still “upbeat” in the 1990s. The world, then, is poised at the beginning of the current millennium at a turning point, an historical moment when we experience a “disturbing [of] the psychosphere” (p. 21).

There's no sense denying it. Following the wisdom of Steve Jobs (certainly not the biblical Job), the appropriate response is now to grow into our new responsibilities. This won't be easy, for the attractions of comfort; security and an almost willful ignorance are strong. It's just easier to slink into purely private concerns and blind ourselves to the demands of life. Fortunately, however, we have some guidance. Scientific inquiries into the growth of the human brain in infancy and childhood supply some clues. Applying what we know about child development to society and culture can't hurt.

It can't hurt either to look honestly at the muddle we've made. O'Hara and Leicester find it illuminating not only that a PowerPoint slide that analyzed the war in Afghanistan revealed "an almost indecipherable mess," but report that it served as a symbol for "millions of senior managers [who] recognized [in it] their own overwhelming situations" (Segal, 2010, May 1)

What to do? What to do?

Among the many gurus upon whom they draw, one of the more foundational is Jacques Delors who, with his colleagues, delivered a compelling report to UNESCO on "education for the twenty-first century" (Delors *et al.*, 1996). Here's what was stressed:

- Learning to be
- Learning to be together
- Learning to know
- Learning to do

And here's where the villainy done to Abraham Maslow comes back to haunt its perpetrators and salvage us. O'Hara and Leicester explain that Delors, Maslow and many other "humanists" do not think hierarchically at all. Life is an all-at-once experience in which certain priorities and needs arise contingently; what we must do is be ready for twists and turns, possess technical skills by all means (it's always good to know how to screw in a light bulb, especially when blessed with electricity), but the *real* path to success as individuals, groups and societies is the capacity to "meet important challenges to life in a complex world." Once we've grasped that, it's all downhill.

Learning to be involves becoming attentive to our own decisions—choosing and reflecting on our choices. We must awaken ourselves to experience and learn judgement through maximizing our human potential. We must read the words of General Stanley McChrystal, ex-U.S. Commander in Chief in Afghanistan, who teaches us the wisdom of humility. We are taken back to Aristotle for a lesson in balance and we are given a final push toward optimism. Oddly, the push takes the form of "challenging" quotes from Zygmunt Bauman and William Butler Yeats, both of whom and for quite different reasons, I cannot imagine endorsing what often threatens to become a "feel-good" book for corporate CEOs.

Learning to be together requires connecting with our respective cultures. Cultural literacy, which is taken to mean "negotiating" with culture rather than what E. D. Hirsch meant when he popularized the term a quarter-century ago as a catalogue of essential knowledge in order to be a functioning American, is crucial to becoming a person of the twenty-first century. In any case,

Hirsch is ignored while Arthur Koestler is given some space to talk about “holons,” people who can look inward and outward at the same time. In any case, the upshot is to see in cultural leaders individuals who are able to be part of the group and simultaneously to transform the group—like Gandhi, Martin Luther King and (though I cannot fathom why) Mother Teresa. The special twenty-first century competency expressed here is knowing “how far to push trickster energy in order to release a group’s greater potential.

Learning to know brings us to what is academically called epistemology. For O’Hara and Leicester, this seems to involve a growing, if unsystematic acquaintance with a vast range of only loosely connected thinkers about thought. Nods are directed toward ancient and inevitable “Eastern” religions, systems theory and cybernetics. Purportedly taking us “beyond the Enlightenment” (the European, not the Buddhist), we are treated to diverse comments from Albert Einstein to Zadie Smith. The narrative comes close to going out of control when allusions are made to Walt Whitman and Werner Heisenberg, Chronos and Kairos, and Bob Dylan—all in a scant twelve pages. Personally, I suspect that six or seven tightly argued pages inspired by my old mentor Gregory Bateson (who is briefly mentioned elsewhere) would have been more helpful—but this is not a book intended for tight argument.

Learning to do, of course, is where things settle down. On page 120, we learn that there is money “at the margins.” Learning to do is a matter of organization. Everything up to this point has been psychology (me) and sociology (us) ... with occasional hints at “it” in the form of a kind of loose appeal to a mental-spiritual-transcendental “cosmic background radiation” only slightly off-stage.

Money, however, matters. Too bad we don’t get more of it. Over forty years ago, Warren Bennis and Philip Slater got together to write a book called *The Temporary Society* (1972). It provided a slightly post-hippie glimpse of at least a North American political economy in which being a “contract worker” was a sign of liberation, corporations became magically horizontal, humanistic values pervaded capitalism and crass exploitation was replaced by energetic, intellectually invigorating and well-paid work. The logic of high technology and the emerging information society was inviting us to better and brighter (though not necessarily bigger) things. The promise remains unfulfilled.

The penultimate chapter in *Dancing at the Edge* brings back memories, but it does not advance the argument a whit. Instead it seems out-of-place in a world in which Walmart has become the ubiquitous symbol of mediocrity, a single step above pervasive suburban strip malls as examples of contemporary Western culture, the grotesquely large and growing gaps between wealth and poverty as the middle class is eliminated in an austerity-driven “race to the bottom,” and developing nations witness the continuation of a first-world economy premised on permanent war and a degree of ecological degradation unmodified by edge-dancing.

I do not wish to sound surly. In fact, I wish these cautious optimists well. They close their book by admitting that they haven’t all the answers and worrying a little that the answers may not be as near and as complete as we need. They hope only that their work will inspire others to head in the same direction, armed with affability and digging deep within themselves to pursue a better and more ample life for themselves and their species. Who could deny them that?

Returning to my initial musing, however, I found O’Hara and Leicester tilted too far to the wrong end of a bipolarity. Psychology and social psychology have much to do with how individuals and groups understand their world and their place within it. What is missing, except for a passing glance at the end, is any recognition that it is politics and the economy or, more accurately, the masters of political and economic life—both human and technological—that define our conditions. Until and unless the issues they raise are addressed, then making creative and life-affirming changes in CEOs and other “leaders” is, I regret to say, a bit of a pipe-dream.

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