

Trends That Will Affect Your Future. . .

The Neuron Strategy

| Stephan A. Schwartz |

The SchwartzReport tracks emerging trends that will affect the world, particularly the United States. For EXPLORE it focuses on matters of health in the broadest sense of that term, including medical issues, changes in the biosphere, technology, and policy considerations, all of which will shape our culture and our lives.

A number of years ago in a Cairo taxi, the legendary scientist and inventor Harold Edgerton of MIT, in answer to my question as to how he had been so successful and had accomplished so much said, “Look for the leverage points; everything else is just friction.” His words in the close hot space of that dusty summer afternoon changed my point of view. I saw in them a statement of social acupuncture, expressed with an engineer’s clarity. A guide to an economy of intention, like a martial arts movement or a ballerina’s gesture. When we think about how poverty might really be ameliorated, independent of ideology, political affiliation, or bias, where are such leverage points to be found? There are so many options. Any day’s mail brings several. How does one select something that will make one’s intention a reality?

One clearly successful leverage point is the microloan—the development of personal loan programs, such as the Grameen Bank—for sums that, in America, are often no more than a golf round or a family’s weekly church donation. Larry Dossey, MD, in the “Explorations” section of this issue, eloquently describes the bank, whose founder, Professor Muhammad Yunus, has just won the Nobel Peace Prize for his microlending effort. But his is only one such program. Take a moment and look at kiva.org, an online microlending

institution. *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof, who became involved with kiva.org, describes it this way, “For those . . . who ask me what they can do to help fight poverty, one option is to sit down at your computer and become a microfinancier. That’s what I did recently. From my laptop in New York, I lent \$25 each to the owner of a TV repair shop in Afghanistan, a baker in Afghanistan, and a single mother running a clothing shop in the Dominican Republic. I did this through www.kiva.org, a web site that provides information about entrepreneurs in poor countries—their photos, loan proposals and credit history—and allows people to make direct loans to them.”¹

A program like this, coming in under the social radar, not only loans money that encourages small business, it changes the social fabric. Most of these loans go to women, and because the loan is made in the context of social relationships, typically other women in the village group take responsibility for the loan. It empowers the women and gives them control over money for the first time in their lives, and operates at almost a 100% repayment rate and is without corruption. In this model, social change, because it comes from the bottom up, not the top down as in most social programs, tends to occur in a way, and at a rate, that the village can absorb without undue stress. This is a different world from the stereotypical international social program. In traditional aid efforts, large first-world institutions demand that third world governments write their laws to reflect specific social policies defined by the first-world donor. This is not only top down, but such programs are widely—almost universally—acknowledged to have massive problems with corruption. Yet, as proponents would argue, history makes it clear these large efforts are a necessary part of poverty eradication.

What history is also now telling us, though, is that so are the microloans of Grameen, Kiva.org, and others. The lesson seems to be that it is going to require both public and private input and that we don’t want to lose sight of the relative merits of each.

In the United States in the early 70s, we can see this dynamic played out. Compare the top-down Great Society programs of President Lyndon Johnson with the bottom-up transition of the military from elitist conscription armed forces that started the Viet Nam war into an all-volunteer meritocracy. President Johnson, for the best of reasons, assembled many of the leading experts of the day to design social programs the federal government could undertake to help the poor. Defense Secretary Melvin Laird, initially through Chief of Naval Operations Elmo Zumwalt, started by asking enlisted personnel and officers, from the most junior to senior, what they liked about the service and what it would take to keep them on their career track. The Great Society, however well intentioned, is mostly forgotten history. The military has become one of our great meritocracies, where race, religion, or social background confer no advantage. Even those who despise the Iraq war admire America’s armed forces.

So we begin to see principles and two points of leverage that can be applied to all manner of purposes: small sums, applied in the right way, at the right time, have a life-affirming transformational power disproportionate to the value of the money involved. And, programs that require social transformation, whether large or small, do best if they can grow from the bottom up.

Here are three other leverage points:

1. Increase of intelligence. Even more fundamental than education in child-

hood development is that a child start life with a healthy brain and nervous system. Even the best pedagogy cannot teach a child whose brain has been crippled because his mother lacked adequate protein in her diet as the fetal brain was forming.

Thanks to a Harvard/MIT research study by Black et al.,² we know that “lower birth weight babies have worse outcomes, both short-run in terms of one-year mortality rates and longer-run in terms of educational attainment and earnings.”

A multi-institutional research team, headed by S.P. Walker of the Epidemiology Research Unit at The University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica, and T.D. Wachs of the Department of Psychological Sciences at Purdue supports the Harvard/MIT team’s findings and expands upon them, saying, “Poverty and associated health, nutrition, and social factors prevent at least 200 million children in developing countries from attaining their developmental potential.” They identify “four key risk factors where the need for intervention is urgent: stunting, inadequate cognitive stimulation, iodine deficiency, and iron deficiency anaemia.” They add that the research data also “warrant interventions for malaria, intrauterine growth restriction, maternal depression, exposure to violence, and exposure to heavy metals.”³

Healthy brains and nervous systems constitute the starting point from which all else flows. Can anyone doubt that societies which do the most to raise the intelligence of their citizens have the highest probability of successfully dealing with their national challenges? Therefore anything that seeks to accomplish this ought to be supported, at whatever level the opportunity presents itself.

2. Gender equality. Societies that both recognize gender differences and affirm fundamental equality will be healthy and prosper in direct proportion to the degree such gender equality is authentic. The evidence for this is overwhelming. Poverty almost always results from extreme gender inequality. And when this is severely out of balance, history shows us there is also

a deadening of creativity and innovation within that society. Anyone who has traveled in the Middle East experiences, below the surface of the culture, a festering sense of humiliation, failure, and anger. Any number of commentators have remarked on this. When you ask intellectuals in those countries what accounts for this malaise, over and over they cite the lack of a modern body of literature, art, or science to which they can point and feel proud. It is a truth easily documented. Consider two markers: patents and books, both creative achievements:

Patents issued in 2006⁴:

- Saudi Arabia, 19
- Egypt, 4
- Syria, 3
- Qatar, 2
- Pakistan, 2
- Lebanon, 2
- Libya, 0
- Total 32

In contrast in that same year, Israel, largely a secular society in which women play a strong role, was granted 1,218 patents. The United States in 2006 saw 196,436 patents granted,⁵ 20% of them—39,287—to women.

Books (of all types, and kinds) published in 1994/1995/1996⁵:

- Saudi Arabia, 3,900
- Egypt, 2,215
- Syria, 598
- Qatar, 209
- Pakistan, N/A
- Lebanon, N/A
- Libya, 26 (1994)
- Total 6,948

In 1995, Israel published 4,000 books and tied Great Britain for publishing the most books per capita. Japan published 56,221.

Clearly, there are disparities here that trace back to cultural differences, including issues of gender equality. This suggests one criterion when considering involvement with one of the thousands—governmental, religious, and private—of poverty relief programs: does it increase gender equality?

Gender equality can be guided by governance but is, at its core, an individual, family, village, and tribal issue. It is a field of behavior created by a reiterated series of individual choices. Ultimately, it is culturally mandated. The best vehicle to shape culture is education. The extremist Islamic groups clearly recognize this. Their vehicle of choice for shifting the zeitgeist is the Madrasah. What alternatives have arisen to counter their worldview?

3. The assimilation of minorities. Those societies that most successfully integrate minorities into their national being will be healthy and prosper in direct proportion to the degree this is authentic and universal. Those societies that have the most neurons firing, to fulfill individual potential, will create the greatest consensus of fulfillment within the commonwealth of which they are a part. Put in headline form: nations with the most brains working a problem succeed.

Therefore, as we look across the spectrum of options where the limited resources available to eliminate poverty can be put to work, one way of triaging the options is to ask: does this assure properly developed brains and nervous systems? Does this promote gender equality? Does this assist the assimilation of minorities? Developing programs that address these leverage points, one might call The Neuron Strategy.

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