Memes and Large System Change

Sandra Waddock, Boston College 2015

In 1976 evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene* invented the term 'meme,' to represent the basic unit of cultural information that replicates from one person to another. Dawkins sought a term that resembled the basic building block of life—the gene—for the basic building block of culture—the meme. Memes generate the complex ideas and other units of information that form into complexes, called memeplexes by Susan Blackmore in her book *The Meme Machine*. Such memeplexes become our belief systems, ideologies, cultures, stories, shared values and norms, and common (or not) understandings, among other things. The core idea of the successful meme is that it transfers from one person to another, like genes, reasonably intact.

Fundamental to today's business and economic system is a set of memes related to the memes within the neoclassical economics model. In what amounts to an ideology or belief system, neoclassical economics (greatly simplified) argues that the purpose of the firm is to generate shareholder wealth, thereby putting shareholders above other stakeholders. The neoclassical economics memeplex argues that self-interested behaviors on the part of firms (and individuals) will somehow generate the common good. Also embedded in current understanding is that growth is an imperative of the economic system—an imperative reflected in an almost obsessive attention to growth in companies' share price, profits, and countries' GNP (even though this measure has been known to be flawed since its inception).

There is plenty of evidence to suggest that some of these memes are problematic. Let's take the growth meme, which seems to be at the core of many issues associated with sustainability. The growth meme is something that needs to change if large systems change is to take place in the direction of sustainability. Sustainability and a sustainable enterprise economy integrally involve development that is not premised on constant growth. They integrate recognition that we live on a finite planet only some of whose resources can be renewed—and even those renewables cannot be drawn down beyond the level at which they can be replaced.

But the meme of growth, which merges in the neoclassical economics memeplex with other memes associating company purpose with share price and profit growth, is powerful, widely, and frequently implicitly adopted. Alternative memes that would favor sustainability have had a hard time becoming as successful as the meme of growth.

Yet arguably, it is memes that are at the heart of what we believe, how we see the world, and how we behave toward that world, its businesses, institutions, and other people. If our core memes are problematic and if they shape our behavior, as they

arguably do, then we need to begin working, at least in part, at the level of memes to bring about large system change.

Perhaps the meme of sustainability has not taken hold because at its root the word 'sustain' has connotations of bearing a burden, maintaining business as usual, and even suffering or enduring without giving way. These connotations are not exactly happily associated with a great future.

Perhaps we need to begin thinking in terms of thriving or flourishing or wellbeing. We need, in short, to find new and successful memes with wide appeal that recognize that our beautiful blue-green planet needs to 'sustain' its productive and diverse biological ecosystems so that human civilization, with all its economic, political, and other institutions, can flourish. What will these new—and more successful—memes be in the context of necessary large systems change towards what we now call sustainability?

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This is the second of two articles by Sandra Waddock on JCC 58, originally published on the Greenleaf Publishing blog. Read the first blog post 'Complexity, Collapse, and Large Systems Change' here.

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