SOCIETY AND PARADOX AT THE END OF THE 20TH CENTURY
c David Woolfson 1995 (revised 1997)

As we approach a new Century and new Millennium we can look back at our history and ahead to the future in very broad terms and on many levels. We can now view our past, present and future in light of the vast new knowledge and increased understanding that we have acquired over the past decades. Therefore, we can begin to discern a clearer path to a positive future.

In this essay, I attempt to address the key concept of Paradox while creating a "two-type" framework for understanding. Paradox has never been very well understood in the past. The purpose of this effort is to help clarify this crucial concept for today and tomorrow.

The Webster's Dictionary defines Paradox as: "A concept or statement that seems contrary to common sense but is perhaps true". Charles Handy, the well-known organizational consultant and best-selling author, in his recent book *The Age of Paradox* sets out the two key features of paradox as "simultaneous opposites" and "unexpected consequences".

Accordingly, closely related to the concept of paradox is the concept of opposites. These concepts have historically led to much confusion as the essence of paradox seems to be against common sense. This has often led to misunderstandings and misperceptions. ***The essential misunderstanding being; "When opposites exist together common sense dictates that only one concept or statement can be true".***

It is now especially crucial for the role of paradoxes and opposites to be better understood as resulting misperceptions appear to underlie much previous conflict. And, there are many paradoxes operating today which could lead to future societal conflict.

Throughout human history, there have always been both positive and negative trends in effect. Generally speaking, today, the positive is pulling us ahead toward much increased understanding, greater cooperation and true global community. While the negative is pushing us back to misunderstanding, conflict and cultural/ethnic separation. These two opposite trends are, accordingly, operating simultaneously.

Accordingly, the situation today of our momentum toward both global community and increased separation at the same time, i.e., two opposite elements occurring simultaneously, is plainly a paradox. It doesn't appear reasonable that opposite trends can be in effect simultaneously but, it is apparent, that they often are.

Paradox, then, does not mean that one of the contradictions must be true while the other must be false. Rather, it often means opposite elements that are actually both true concurrently. We tend to routinely think in terms of "either/or".

However, in reality it is frequently not "either/or" but "both/and together at the same time.

As the opposite elements in many paradoxes occur simultaneously, the key in such a relationship system can not be to address one opposite element while ignoring the other. The key is to recognize <u>both</u> elements. On this basis, I have attempted to identify two basic types of Paradox Systems applicable to situations where there are two opposite elements in effect.

I refer to the first as a ***Single Preference Paradox System***. In this system one of the opposite elements is clearly much more preferable to us then the other from a societal perspective. Accordingly, our goal in this type of Paradox System should be to actively support and promote the preferable alternative.

The second basic type is the ***Dual Preference Paradox System.*** In this system both opposite elements are necessary and preferable to us from a societal perspective. In these systems, then, we should have the very different goal of finding an effective balance or equilibrium between the two opposite elements.

The above referred to "**Globalism/Tribalism**" paradox occurring today is an excellent example for the application of the "Single Preference" system. I believe that most people would agree that increased understanding, cooperation and global community are positive long-term goals, whereas, misunderstanding, conflict and separation are not. Thus, we should make a clear choice in favour of global community as to the application of our societal energies and resources.

However, as this is a "systems" concept we must also constantly recognize the existence of the countervailing element and the strong relationship that exists between the opposite positive and negative elements, and particularly, in terms of the potential for unexpected consequences and results. Accordingly, the necessity for balance also applies in the Single Preference system although not in an equal balance. In this type of system it is apparent that one of the opposite elements, in this case global community, is clearly the preferable societal goal. Both globalism and tribalism, however, must still co-exist.

The "Dual Preference" Paradox System can be demonstrated by addressing three of the major societal paradoxes apparent today. Again, in this system both opposite elements are clearly necessary and preferable to us - not just one. Thus, we should apply our societal energies and resources to support <u>both</u> elements. The goal is to find a balance between the opposites which is close to an equal one, i.e., 50/50.

The first such paradox is the "**Self/Community**" one which has been one of the key societal paradoxes of human history. In the 20th Century we saw the development of opposite social systems which embodied the ultimate expression of each of these opposite concepts. Pure capitalism as the ultimate expression of Self Interest as a social system and pure communism as the ultimate expression of the Community Interest completely overwhelming the individual.

Much recent history has actually been a search for balance between Self and Community. Today, of course, neither "pure" social system exists in practice any longer. All governments since the 1930's have attempted to find a workable balance between the two by incorporating elements of both systems into their policies and laws. This resulted in the appearance of various degrees of socialism including "social democracy" in many nations and today seems to be developing into "social capitalism" where the element of individualism is more prominent.

The search for equilibrium is a continuing search and an effective balance needs to be found in each nation according to it's specific circumstances. We are approaching this understanding today. However, in the recent past, this same search resulted in terrible human suffering and loss of life. In this century, millions of people lost their lives and freedom as a result of this search for equilibrium which also very nearly led to nuclear holocaust. This is a very clear indication of the severe costs involved when an underlying system is misunderstood.

Secondly, there is the "**Unity/Diversity**" identity paradox which is also the cause of much confusion and violent conflict. There are over 5000 different cultures and languages in our world. New countries are being created every year and there will likely be over 200 nations shortly. At the same time globalization is continually accelerating at many levels including economics, environment, culture, etc. The Unity/Diversity paradox is, thus, obvious; "How is it that we are becoming both more unified and more diverse at the same time as these are opposites?" The answer is also obvious. We can be both united and diverse at the same time.

Again, opposites need not indicate confusion or conflict. It is only our misperception of being forced to choose "one over the other" or "either/or" of these opposites that is at the root of these conflicts. We have wrongly assumed that having one means that we must sacrifice the other. Further, this belief is so ingrained in our thinking that we stubbornly stick to it even in the face of substantial evidence to the contrary.

There's absolutely no conflict in identifying oneself with our cultural background and with the larger community as a whole. The 20th century has seen a great deal of multiple identification because of the vast movement of peoples. Millions of people identify themselves this way on a daily basis - as English/Canadians,

Chinese/Americans, East Indian/Europeans, etc. In addition to our cultural and national identifications, we are all now rapidly becoming global citizens as well.

Again, we can see that both these apparently opposing elements are really essential parts of a larger whole. The key is in finding the right balance and harmony within the whole - between the broader national and global level unities and our particular cultural, ethnic and religious diversities. Our task and goal, then, is to find "unity within diversity" in our identifications and practices. This should be based upon the mutual understanding that both aspects are necessary and preferable and that a workable equilibrium is possible. If we do not there will likely be a continuation and escalation of such conflicts in the future. Many of these will be violent conflicts. Once again, there can be a very high price to pay for misunderstanding.

The third societal paradox is the recent "**Local/Global**" one. Our perception based on the "either/or" model is; "How can we be both more global and more local at the same time?" As above, both directions can be seen as opposites of each other. And, yes we are becoming both more local and more global today. Again, their opposing nature in no way requires us to choose between them.

Current trends indicate that our world is becoming both more "local community based" and more "global" at the same time. More local in terms of increased individual desire to be involved in their communities and participate in decision-making effecting their lives while more global in terms of globalization and the large-scale interdependence of economic, environmental and social factors. This need not and should not be a source of future conflict.

Therefore, the credo of the age is no longer "Think Globally and Act Locally" but is now "Think and Act both Locally and Globally"!

Based on the misunderstanding of this meaning of "opposites", many people seem to feel that our inevitable entry into the "global age" is somehow a threat to their local autonomy. This is because of the misperception that the increase of one must inevitably lead to the decrease of the other. As there is no essential conflict the real issue, in my view, is the particular level at which decisions should be made and implemented - at the local community, regional, provincial or state, national or global levels.

To conclude, we need not carry our current misunderstandings into the new Century and new Millennium as the seeds of future conflicts. It is clear from the above examples, that societal paradoxes exist at many levels and that both opposite elements are often necessary and preferable. Accordingly, both elements can and must co-exist in an effective balance if we are to be successful in the future. The key to success in the future is a truer understanding of the concept of paradox and how we, as societies, will balance the opposite elements and trends.