

Reimagining Scale: A Quantum View of Social Change by Preeta Bansal

Preeta Bansal offers a new "quantum" vision of scale, impact, and social change. In this engaging talk in the American heartland, she shares what might be called a homecoming speech of the truest kind - a return to the heart. Weaving her family's personal moonshot of arriving into middle America concurrently with America's (and humanity's) own literal moonshot through the Apollo 11 mission, she sets the stage for the gravity of heavy realizations from her own rocket-like career trajectory into the highest echelons of conventional power, and back to "a place that operates at a human and community scale bound to land and nature."

Preeta Bansal has spent more than 30 years in senior roles in government, global business, and corporate law practice - as General Counsel and Senior Policy Advisor in the Executive Office of the U.S. President (White House), Solicitor General of the State of New York, partner and practice chair at Skadden Arps, global general counsel in London for one of the world's largest banks, a US diplomat and Chair of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, and law clerk to US Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens. She has advised on the drafting of the constitutions of Iraq and Afghanistan. After a long career scaling the heights of external and institutional power, she has spent the last 6 years more deeply plumbing depths of being for the source of - and ancient tools for accessing - internal power, as well as studying network science and the role of emerging technologies in amplifying small shifts in behavior and consciousness. What follows is the video and transcript of a TEDx talk she delivered in June, 2019.

Transcript

Exactly 50 years ago this summer, the summer of 69, my family hovered around a television. It was a standing black and white set, complete with the rabbit ears. Though I was just shy of 4 years old, I remember the awe-inspiring and celebratory feeling of that day. We were watching a wondrous other-worldly event in an amazing new world country on our very own television, something we hadn't even heard of just a few months before.

We had just migrated to the United States. My father had arrived that academic year as a doctoral student in engineering at the University of Kansas - and my mom, brother and sister and I had joined him from India a few months later. So we were living in Lawrence that summer of 69 when the first manned space mission, Apollo 11, successfully landed on the moon, [slide] an event we apparently couldn't help ourselves from capturing off the television screen. ... As if there wouldn't be other photos of the event. [slide] Clearly, the event was a huge one in our family. [slide]

And while my young girl memories of the day have undoubtedly been supplemented by these saved photos [slide] [slide] - I have a visceral memory of the joy and excitement of my father. [slide]

He was an explorer, endlessly curious about new worlds. I have since come to realize - as a public lawyer - the historical context that brought him here. Soon after the civil rights movement, the Immigration Act of 1965 eliminated the last remaining formal color line in US legislation to provide skilled labor for this country. Before that, immigrants had been admitted based on their national origin, which was a racial and ethnic classification. But the 1965 law abolished the national origin quota system to attract skilled professionals from countries in Asia, rather than Europe alone.

So with this opening, my Dad applied for and gained admission for his doctoral studies in this country - a kind of crazy moonshot dream for a young engineer coming from a humble background in India. And then he ensured that my mother also received her doctoral degree after we moved to Lincoln in 1970.

In the age of successful moon landings, our education system encouraged my generation to think big - teaching us to believe in the power of the reason to break down, debate and solve massive problems. It was an overwhelming belief in the power of the mind - an abiding faith that we can think our way through any complex social problem.

And so with a certain toolkit, I went on, from little old Lincoln, Nebraska, to have a bit of a moonshot career - taking me to the United States Supreme Court, White House, and to diplomatic, legal, and corporate roles around the world.

But then something happened to upend and disrupt my own trajectory. It was actually two things.

First, I felt keenly the limits of that old toolkit to address complex problems of a certain scale, at least without doing a good amount of collateral damage along the way. When you're working on a piece of legislation that takes up 2200 pages, or working for a corporation operating in 83 countries, or working on causes and issues that can now go viral globally almost overnight, the idea that you can map or fully anticipate cause and effect seems pretty far-fetched. That's true at the apparent level, much less the subtle or root level.

Working on issues that can affect the lives of a 100 million or a billion people - as happens in Silicon Valley or Wall Street, Washington, London, and other elite power centers - may sound impactful and well-meaning, except that there's no way you can be in relationship with a million or billion people.

In an era of exponential technology and change, where institutional mottos include "move fast and break things," and where BHAGs, or big hairy audacious goals, are celebrated, I became keenly aware of the Hippocratic Oath, "first do no harm." And while that certainly doesn't advocate failing to act, it does counsel humility and conscious awareness about the scope and speed of our actions - a near-impossible task for actions at a certain scale.

I found myself questioning the whole mantra that bigger is better, or that impact and scale should be measured by breadth rather than depth. More knowledge, after all, does not mean more wisdom, and more resources do not lead to more well-being. I began

seeking a different way, a kind of disruption in our models of “impact” and social change.

The second thing that disrupted my trajectory was that, almost at the same time that I saw the limits of the old toolkit, I gained new tools. These tools were very different from what I’d acquired through education. They allowed me to scale depths - to look inward and immediately around me, not just externally, for power and impact - and to tap into a deeper, more infinite power source than the head alone: the energy of the heart, and of love. Not just intimate love, but the love that comes from feeling, deeply inside, that we are all one organism bound inextricably together, just like the cells and organs of our body require one another for sustenance.

After I left the White House in 2012, I signed up for my first 10-day silent meditation retreat on a bit of a lark. I hadn’t meditated for even 10 seconds before, much less 10 days. Well, it turned out to be the first of many more to come and the beginning of a new way of daily life over the past 7 years. Because with awareness and deep concentration on breath and body sensations for an extended period, I experienced a tiny glimpse of what sages and mystics of all faith traditions have been saying for millennia. And what modern science and quantum physics have only finally verified in the past century - that all physical matter (including our bodies) is constantly shifting and re-forming into a new mass every nanosecond. Matter is comprised of ever-changing wavelets, and we are in constant exchange of particles with one another. The seeming boundaries between you and me are highly permeable, and at core nonexistent. I caught a momentary glimpse of the reality of a dissolved self and a dissolved ego. We are an interconnected organism, and every interaction I have with a so-called “other” is an interaction I am having with myself.

Think about that for a second - every interaction I have is with myself. It’s not just that I am my brother’s keeper, or that I should do unto others what I would have them do unto me. It’s that I am my brother, and what I do to others I am in fact doing to myself. Just as the cells and particles within our body form one organism, all of us are interconnected parts of a single larger whole. And I caught a glimpse of this not as an abstract idea, but as an embodied experience.

And think about that as a source of so-called power - we impact the whole not just through top-down acts that allow us to act externally on the world from on high. Instead, if we just do our part to shift and heal our energy “in here” so as to emanate love and peace in just the few feet immediately around us - we powerfully impact the whole through our being.

Gandhi said “we must be the change we seek to see in the world,” and with that he said that we transform the world by transforming ourselves. This doesn’t mean that we should get lost in the self, but rather that we should see our own lives and work and relationships as a front line, a first place we can practice the kind of connection to self, others, and nature that we seek to enhance through our big moonshot projects in the world.

Mandela, after all, had his greatest impact not through his activism and statecraft alone, but by his deep presence and loving being that energetically permeated his outer work. That presence was cultivated through decades as a political prisoner where he went deep within to access and unleash the power of his heart. Imagine the impact of such a superpower of loving, healing presence in the hands of even a few people so as to trigger a chain reaction in our collective organism.

This opened me to the validity of a different model of social change - a quantum view that

involves a small, distributed group of people changing the world from the inside out, energetically from the micro-, particle level, and not just the massive, macro-scale.

Disruptions in our social systems often follow and lag behind shifts in our technology and scientific understandings. The invention of the printing press in the 15th century, after all, gave rise to the Protestant Reformation, the decline of the Holy Roman Empire, and the rise of nation-states. The invention of the steam engine in the 1700s led to factories, urbanization, and the moral philosophy – from Adam Smith to Rousseau and Mill – that created the foundations for the modern state and our market economy. The digital revolution of the past decades is now transforming exponentially our social, governing and economic systems anew.

And so it seems only fitting that we should be open to receiving new understandings of social change in the 21st century, given that quantum physics and relativity theory have now upended the millennia-long Newtonian view that we are discrete, separate beings or that only external force can alter the direction of mass. And network science has informed us of the vast collective effects that can result from seemingly disparate “small” individual acts. Certainly in nature, we see beautiful examples of collective impact and collective intelligence, as when the micro-movements of an individual starling can affect thousands, and sometimes millions, of neighboring birds to form a shape-shifting flock or murmuration.

So where did this all lead me? Back home to Nebraska, of course. When I tell people I’ve moved back here after 35 years on the East Coast and abroad, they kind of nervously laugh, and say “Why? What happened?” And they’re really thinking – “did she have a breakdown?” And I say, “I just really want to be here.” The truth is, I did break; I broke open – to a breakthrough, not a breakdown.

After exploring all the outer worlds, I found myself seeking a new space – not outer space or an elevated place, but the open, grounded plains of Nebraska. There seems no better place to experiment with the quantum theory of change than in a place that operates at a human and community scale bound to land and nature.

And it’s in Nebraska that I’ve begun to tap into a different personal energy source. I often tell people that I thought I was blonde til I was 25. I say that jokingly, of course, but only half-jokingly. Because the truth is, when I was growing up in 1970s Nebraska, there weren’t too many kids around here who looked like me. The only Indians anyone had heard of were those that we now call native Americans. And in that environment, you had to basically assimilate or die. And assimilate I did on the outside – to such a large degree, in fact, that I buried my feelings of difference deep inside me.

The buried feelings fueled my moonshot with an energy based on separation and fear. I analogize it now to dirty, fossil-fuel type energy. An energy that is finite and that relies on external, hierarchical and extractive forms of power to replenish. The kind of energy that can power our rocket ships but that also can unwittingly further our own and others’ suffering.

And I’ve come to realize that each of us carries within us this fossil fuel of buried feelings of fear and separation. Whether we are educated or uneducated; rich or poor; white, brown or black; Christian or non-Christian. It may be a lack of love at home, or just general feelings of unworthiness or “less than” and “not enough”. Whatever our cross to bear, it can power us to keep acting, but those actions – even when they’re wildly successful, or maybe especially when they’re wildly successful – can turn into an excuse

for busy-ness and avoidance.

I've learned to design and create new kinds of social spaces now - not the big constitutional structures I worked on in the past, including in Iraq and Afghanistan - but conversational and other small-scale collective spaces that allow for deep listening, another kind of tool I've added to my toolkit.

When we hold space to be in touch with ourselves and one another, we begin to access and unleash the blocked energy of the heart to tap into a new type of fuel - a renewable, clean, and infinitely regenerative energy based on connection and love. And as we heal ourselves, we shift the energy of others around us and help heal the world.

Amazingly, my post-moonshot experience is not unlike what our astronauts discovered when they journeyed to the moon. Frank White interviewed the dozens of astronauts of the American space program. He found that they were most transformed not by their glimpse of outer space, but by turning their gaze back around at Earth and seeing themselves anew. [slide]

White coined the phrase "the overview effect" to describe a profound, spiritual, cognitive shift in awareness reported by astronauts while viewing the Earth from orbit. From space, boundaries and conflicts vanish, and it becomes deeply obvious that we humans are just stardust, reconfigured from the same molecules comprising one another and the cosmos.

I have to confess that I've been struggling more than usual with this talk. Words in this kind of a setting feel more like the first part of my journey - the occupying of space with our minds. It feels like the antithesis of holding space with our hearts, the kind of being and deep listening of others that I seek. Ultimately, my own commitment is to try to keep doing the work of becoming and embodying the change.

So let's embrace the approach of healing and transforming the world by healing and transforming ourselves. And not just at the margins. Not just as a nice, quaint and feel-good self-care supplement for the real work we have to do on our big issues - but rather as the real work. [slide]

Einstein said we can't solve problems at the same level of consciousness that created them. He and his contemporaries also discovered that each of us is constantly co-creating and transforming the universe through changes at the quantum level. So let's right-size our lives and focus to the very personal and human scale - really concentrating on disentangling and freeing the boundless flows of love and energy at our depths. And then let the laws of nature and the cosmos multiply our personal transformations out into our planet and beyond.