

# ‘Societal Appreciative Inquiry: rethinking human dignity and sustainability for re-inventing society’

BY MARCEL VAN MARREWIJK



Klaas van Egmond



In the dark plenary hall of the Ghent Convention Centre the album cover of Hotel California appeared. The beautiful tones of the Eagles filled the room. The audience sang alone in a harmonious karaoke:

*'Mirrors on the ceiling,  
the pink champagne on ice  
And she said 'we are all just prisoners here, of our own device'...*

Klaas van Egmond appeared on stage. Obviously a professor - an environmental scientist. His opening view is that our devices - not least greed - have caused the emergence of materialistic patterns in our (Western) civilizations. And the song points out where we find ourselves:

*... gathered for the feast.  
They stab it with their steely knives,  
but they just can't kill the beast.*

Van Egmond is motivated by Dennis Meadows' (1972) Club of Rome report: *Limits to Growth*. This carries a number of doomsday scenarios which have been ridiculed by many over the years. Yet, the forecasts in the report, while not all accurate, do point to events such as peak industrial performance in 2010 and seem very close to reality.

In fact, today we find many of the warning indicators in the report on an exponential growth curve. And as van Egmond stated clearly: no system on earth cannot stand *infinity*. It will all come crashing down if we do not alter current patterns.

Van Egmond argues that we must re-think and reflect upon human dignity and sustainability in order to re--invent society. He has learned that the solution for the sustainability problem has to be found in social and cultural dynamics, rather than in technological development only. We must study our values, as these support the economic, financial and societal systems.

Van Egmond has approached this challenge through researching the characteristic values of thousands of civilians over many countries. If the wisdom of the crowds stands, the pie-chart below is the reflection of our current status.

This chart has been constructed along the lines of the old Celtic Cross, symbolizing the two opposites people have to reconcile.



figure Piechart

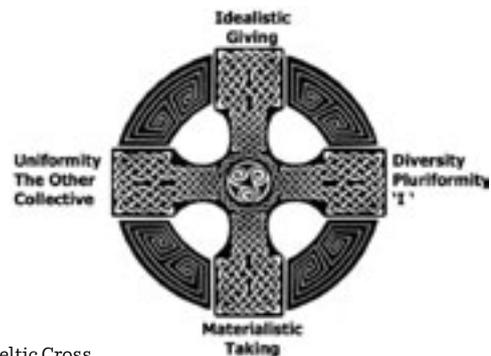


figure Celtic Cross

Both lines have inspired different philosophers and scientists. Mind vs. matter, to have or to be, I against the world. It fragments and it pushes people out of their boundaries, out of touch with the point of balance. Since the Heisenberg experiment we know that we are both part and the whole at the same time. It is now the time to understand what these scientists were saying from a wider perspective. It is time we learn from our history!

Van Egmond sketched a brief history of the Western Civilization, starting with early Christianity and the rise of the church. He explained that here we saw our first catastrophe: the inquisitions, killing thousands of heretics. Many years later Marx explained that social conditions influence the quality of our lives, but this thinking quickly perverted into hardcore Stalinism, killing millions in the Soviet death camps. In a similar way, Darwinism was perverted into a political system (Nazism) with the same outcome, but with the Jews as their main victim. The fourth catastrophe emerged when the industrial revolution led to environmental degradation, exploitation and pollution. Reagan and Thatcher appear in the story next, favoring individualism and autarky. Their thinking aligns with a perverted version earlier pub-

lished in *Atlas Shrugged* by Ayn Rand. It made way for financial greed and the dominance of Wall Street. Finance no longer supports the real economy but created loops in order to make money with money, completely out of bounds, endangering economic progress and the quality of life. We now risk decadence, hedonism, barbarism, and the fragmentation of all against all.

We have failed to stay between the lines, the zone that represents the balance. We should have kept the virtues in the middle, as the old Greeks already said. Our lack of consensus in the understanding of human nature has allowed societies to degenerate into their own caricature and led to associated catastrophes. Instead of a focusing on balance, reconciling the controversies, we over-exposed into extremes, one-sided versions of certain human values.

But there is always hope. Van Egmond joyfully highlighted that only the night before, the Dutch parliament succeeded to draft a new, more inclusive approach that included all political parties! For once, the adversaries choose to collaborate in designing a common future. Working with partners from opposite ends automatically results in a virtuous centre.

Klaas van Egmond takes examples from the rich Western cultural heritage. The wisdom introduced above is acknowledged in many religions and recognized by various artists and poets. To give only a few examples from his long list:

- William Yeats wrote the *Second Coming* and used the metaphor: *The falcon cannot hear the falconer* – expressing that virtues pervert to extremes, out of touch with their core and consciousness.
- He related to Icarus' burning of his wax of his 'wings' when he enters dangerous heights, failing to stay between the lines.
- Cinderella kept the balance middle between the two ugly sisters, each of whom represent perverted extremes of 'heaven' and 'earth'.
- He reflected on several paintings of islands; wherein the land represents consciousness while the sea reflects unconsciousness... the hero's role being about bridging the opposites.
- And he told of stories such as Wagner's *Ring der Nibelung* – full of allegory for human struggle to find balanced wisdom and virtue.

Van Egmond spends extra effort in describing Percival's quest for the Holy Grail. In his early life he encounters a king but fails to make the ultimate inquiry and is thrown into the dark periphery, where he encounters all of man's temptations. Only at the end of his life is he able to appreciatively inquire into the king's health, becoming a true connected leader, including all values and virtues. The knights of King Arthur's Round Table represent our circle of values. Each time the King sent them out to confront the darkness – gaining deeper understanding from the extremes – to return to the table enriching the group's collective wisdom.

How about the Asian heritage? Many old stories, such as the Hindu Mahabharata, beautifully align with the core of Western wisdom. Currently, Western focus is aiming at uniformity and materialistic values, slowly shifting to more spiritual ones, while the Eastern cultures focus at opposite values. However, materialistic tendencies grow in importance. The ends meet and together – at the global scale – we can cover all necessary values. That is hopeful.

Good and evil are a matter of circumstance. A particular event can be good to balance a development, but can turn into evil when it is perverted at the other extreme. A one-sided approach is always bad. We need more than democracy. We need systems and institutions that are able to reconcile all opposites, discourage all extreme caricatures, encourage the centripetal forces bringing systems at ease in the virtuous middle, a balanced position, a synthesis at the centre.

Klaas van Egmond sees an important role for Appreciative Inquiry. The ultimate truth is knowing by compassion. This implies that people must engage in connection, emphatically inquiring for the matters that worry, the dreams that inspire. It gives recognition and inclusion, establishing new societies at a higher level of complexity, able to face the challenges at hand. The collective outcomes of AI-findings will bring humanity at a higher level, aligning technologies with the dignity of mankind.

Sustainability is the skill to stay out from the periphery. And we have no choice but to take action. Because when we think of this world: *We can check out anytime we like, but we can never leave!*

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Video presentation Klaas van Egmond ▶