

The Cake and The Table: Systems Thinking for the 21st Century

By Frank D. Smith on January 16, 2023



Fight, Flight, or Freeze. Can We Still Choose?

When approaching most problems people treat it like a cake on the table. They will mess around in the frosting, and maybe they go down into the cake. But, they rarely go to the plate, the table, or all the way to the floor where the source of most problems lie. Sometimes what we think is a world-shaking catastrophe is really just that we need to eat a sandwich and take a nap.

Let's examine the metaphor of the cake and the table. Say someone comes into a room with a cake on a table. They noticed that the top of the cake is not level, and maybe even the cake is sliding from the center of the table towards one end.

At this point, some people will add frosting to the top of the cake and level it out. If the cake is sliding they may even put a napkin underneath the plate for friction.

Other people will disassemble the cake and cut the top layer to level it out and then re-frost the cake.

A smaller subset of people will check the legs of the table or maybe even put a level on the tabletop itself and find out which direction the table is out of level. They will even be able to logically deduce one thing about the problem is with the table; it has to be two legs shorter on one side and not one, otherwise the table would wobble. (Ooh, table logic! That is knowledge of three levels of abstraction down from the primary symptom).

And this is the final step that most people will take, they will shim up the two legs and level the table and go on about their party.

Very few people will actually put the level on the floor and see if the root causes there and when they find out that to be the case they will actually re-level the floor and solve the problem from the root cause.

Systems thinkers tend to take a different approach, they have to go to the “floor” and seek root causes to problems and work from there. They have to be specialists in each of the individual parts of the system, but also be a specialist in the connections between the parts. This gives them a certain perspective often called the “Helicopter View”. Before there were helicopters it was known as the “Bird's-Eye View” or in some circles “The God's Eye View”. but these days we've got enough people in technology thinking that they are gods that we don't need to discuss that designation here. We just need to think “Big Picture, Long View”.

After all, if we strive to be cave people from the future, that does imply that we are, by nature, cave people. And cave people were the original systems thinkers. They had to think from the scale of the night sky down to the Earth under them (the tracks in the dirt and flow of the water) and what it could provide. This systems thinking also allowed them to avoid many of the perils of the natural world.

The 21st century requires us to violate some of our basic cavepeople biology. We are biologically built with a fight, flight, or freeze instinct built into us. Unless you choose to leave the developed world, joining indigenous peoples living as they have for over 20,000 years, there is nowhere left to fly.

Our flight Instinct is completely retarded by modern society. We are only left to fight or freeze. This can make for some really messed up cavemen. And since we are living with what is mostly a patriarchal society still, **cavemen** are often the main issue with this fight reflex. Some will freeze, but most will fall back on fight.

Not that women don't fall prey to this as well because they will definitely fight in the right condition and based on who they are, but when some men will fight, some women will freeze, and neither is an optimum operating condition for a human. Of course, let's not pick nits and accept that both women and men can be caught in the fight or freeze loop. This has nothing to do with what was once called "The Battle of the Sexes". This is attributable to **all** humans.

We rarely have the opportunity to fly to safety. 50,000 years ago, if conditions were just too untenable where we were, we could pick up and pack onto the next location. But there are so many of us now that there are not many places left to fly to. And if it was a personal issue we could run away and at least get a break and catch our breath before returning to the tribe.

And if the tribe had such an issue with us that they no longer wanted us as members of the group but we had not violated taboo in such a way that we would be killed, we could run off and make our own way trying our best to live solo, or by a small miracle be accepted into another tribe.

In our global society. There are so many of us. Over 7 billion and counting. And yet we are still by nature tribal creatures. We can only interact with so many other individuals, maybe 20 closely and it is said only up to 150 as our social group. So we seek out ways to build our new tribes within this ocean of humanity.

Whether it's neighborhoods(from gangs to community action networks) in an urban environment, or in rural areas "sundown towns" and "our high school football team is better than your high school football team" rivalries between two towns, we break ourselves down into groups that we can manage and enhance our lives as best we can.

One of the wonders of the Net is that it brings us all connected together as one Global Tribe and allows us to break down into manageable digital tribes based on interests and values and finally breaks the geographic and regional barriers that have kept like-minded people from forming their own tribes.

This is both a positive and a negative.

For some people the new technology allows them to create a bubble where none of their assumptions are questioned and they are fed nothing but input from other people who are like-minded and fall prey to confirmation biases and groupthink.

For others it is a lifeline that allows them to find out that they are not alone and that there are others struggling with the same things in life that they are, and they can connect and get the support that a tribe can provide. Digital tribes are slowly replacing physical tribes as we connect into a global community.

This brings us back around to the need for all Digital Cave people to become systems thinkers again. Technology is allowing us to build a society which is in many ways consequence free from poor decisions. Pundits often speak of the woes of social media and yet many people seem to love their small groups based on interest and values.

Which is the truth? Is social media and other emerging technology somehow evil by nature or just another tool that we have to choose to use responsibly?

A digital cave person who is making the decision to live as a system thinker will find that they can navigate the digital world in the same way that their ancestors navigated the physical world and build tribes, and interact with other digital tribes, making connections that tie us together all around the Earth. Many of us have found the Net the last place to fly to. And the “floor” is the place to look for the best results in decision making while we gather and travel digitally.