

Crisis Ahead? Here's Why You Shouldn't Lose Hope

A few thoughts from Christopher Kent

If you're worried about what's happening in Washington—and the intense polarization we're seeing in America right now—then you may suspect that our country is about to go into a period of crisis. A few years ago, when I wrote my book *Staying Off the Wheel of Misfortune*, one of my motivations was to help people get through a crisis with minimal suffering. With that in mind, I'd like to share a few thoughts that apply to our current situation.

When we find ourselves in a crisis, things can become frightening, overwhelming and painful, and it's easy to lose hope. That's not a good thing, because if we do lose hope, we're more likely to suffer and more likely to make bad decisions. However, it's our perspective about what's happening around us that determines whether or not we lose hope. If things look dire and we conclude that we're doomed—that this is the end—then we're probably going to be pretty miserable. On the other hand, if we experience the crisis as a chaotic series of events that is nevertheless going to lead to a positive ending—even if that ending isn't easy to see—we're less likely to suffer and less likely to make bad choices.

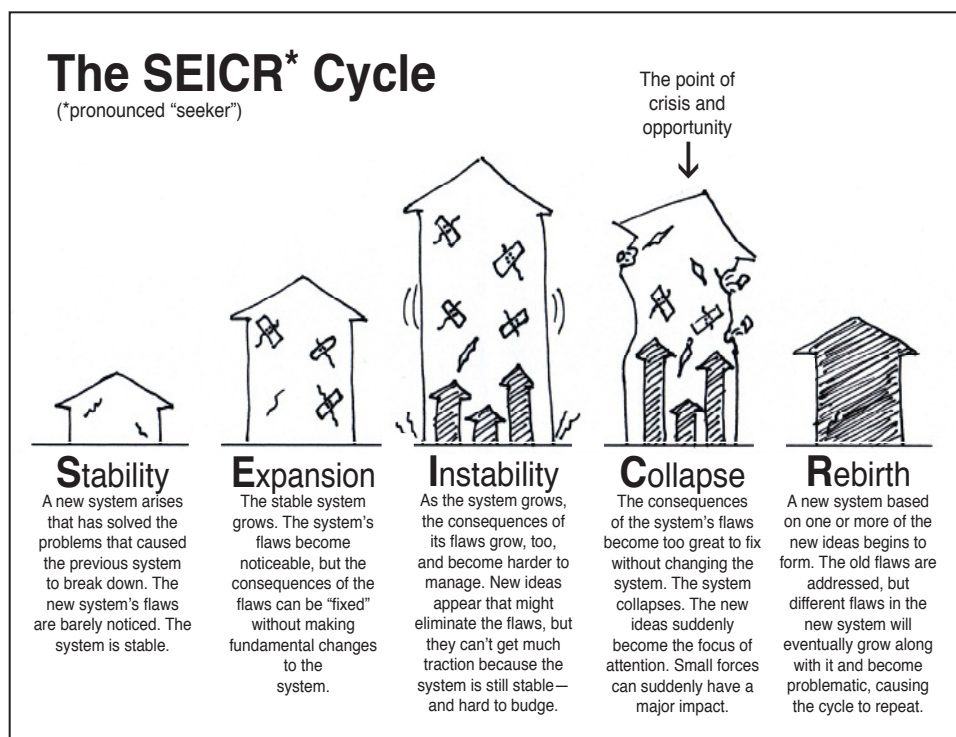
In the first chapter of my book *Staying Off the Wheel of Misfortune*, I talk about life-changing crises (like the one we may soon be facing) and how they are a part of the normal cycle of growth. This growth cycle is something that every living thing, and every growing system, goes through, including people, relationships, countries and economies. We tend to think of growth as a long, slow climb, but that's actually only one part of the growth cycle. Seen from a larger perspective, growth takes place following a pattern that could be described as three steps forward, one step back. A key part of that cycle is a periodic breakdown of order, in which the status quo goes out the window and things appear chaotic for a period of time.

This is true for a very important reason. Every system that's growing has flaws built into it, things that

don't work perfectly. As the system gradually develops and expands, those flaws also grow and expand, slowly becoming more problematic. Any complex system (a country, for example) likes stability, so whatever flaws are inherent in the system will be managed with the minimum possible disturbance. Those built-in flaws can't easily be corrected without making fundamental changes to the entire system, so they're treated as symptoms that can be controlled. And they are controlled as the system grows and expands...for a while.

At some point, however, the problems caused by these flaws can no longer be treated by applying a bandage and hoping for the best. At that point, the flaws suddenly threaten the continuation of the system. As a result, the system goes into crisis and a period of collapse follows. In the case of an economic system or a country, people are confronted with the reality that those flaws can no longer be "swept under the rug;" they must be dealt with. That can only be done by making fundamental changes to the system and starting anew.

I call this growth cycle the SEICR Cycle, because it involves a series of steps that can be identified as follows: Stability; Expansion; Instability; Collapse; and Rebirth. Here's an illustration showing how this works:



As I mentioned, the period of crisis and collapse near the end of the cycle is crucial to the growth and survival of any growing system. That's true for a very simple reason: It allows really big corrections to be made. Without this chaotic period, the flaws in the stable system would simply continue to grow until the system was overcome and ceased to function. For that reason, this crisis period can also be thought of as a period of great opportunity. (It's not a coincidence that the Chinese symbols for crisis and opportunity are one and the same.)

Consider American history. The problems that existed between Britain and the colonies in the 1700s couldn't be resolved until the Revolutionary War was fought. Slavery couldn't be abolished until we fought the Civil War. The suffering of ordinary people in a country where the rich were getting richer and the poor were getting poorer couldn't be addressed until we underwent an economic collapse followed by the Great Depression. In each case, it took a great crisis to allow fundamental corrections to be made.

I believe we may be entering another such period in American history. Suddenly, the stable version of America that most of us grew up with is looking very shaky. That raises the question: What problems have been building over the past decades that have led to this potential crisis and need to be fixed? I'm sure everyone can make a list of their own, but mine would include:

- a resurgence of the widening gap between rich and poor;
- an explosion in the number of Americans willing to base their choices and actions on certainty rather than facts (which not only shuts out contradictory evidence, but also makes us much more vulnerable to being fooled by people who do not have our best interests at heart);
- gradual elimination of actual democratic voting, thanks to unlimited money being allowed to influence campaigns; gerrymandered voting districts that make it possible to win an election despite getting fewer votes; and easily hacked voting machines that have no paper trail.

Winston Churchill famously said that democracy is the worst form of government—except for all the others. Democracy is a great idea—when it works—*because it protects the majority from the certainties of a minority*. That's what democracy is meant to do. Unfortunately, it sometimes fails to do that because 1) elections can be stolen; and 2) the majority can sometimes be fooled into voting against their own best interests.

If, in fact, we are headed into a crisis period in American history, remember that no matter how painful and scary the next couple of years may be, this is a normal, if difficult, part of the growing cycle. It will allow us to fix fundamental problems that we haven't been able to fix until now, hopefully including the problems I mentioned above. The Revolutionary War gave us democracy and freedom from a feudal aristocracy. The Civil War ended slavery. The Great Depression gave us Social Security and Medicare, preventing millions of elderly Americans from dying in poverty and sickness. If we're lucky, whatever happens in the next couple of years will solve some very serious problems that we haven't been able to solve up until now, leaving us with a stronger democracy and a country better able to achieve its highest ideals.

If we do find ourselves in a crisis, here's my advice:

1. Don't despair or lose hope. There is light at the end of the tunnel.
2. Let go of certainty. Your life may depend on seeing the facts as they really are, not as someone with a vested interest wants you to see them.
3. Don't waste your energy hating anyone. If you feel you must indulge in hate, hate bad ideas, not people.

—*Christopher Kent, January 2017*

PS: If you'd like to learn more about the SEICR Cycle and how it works, the first chapter of my book *Staying Off the Wheel of Misfortune*—the chapter that talks about the SEICR cycle—can be read for free at Amazon.com. The book is also available at Barnes&Noble.com.