

# *in*·coherence

*Issue #2*

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## The Maps We Carry



### Note from the Editor

In Issue #1, we named the condition: a civilization accelerating past its capacity to feel – systems humming with data but losing the relationships that give it meaning. The Age of Incoherence described the pattern from the outside.

This issue moves inside.

*The Maps We Carry* is a personal account of how the maps we inherit – from family, education, profession, and culture – shape not just what we believe, but how we walk through life. It traces my own path from the maps I adopted to something closer to a compass, developed from the inquiry within the journey itself.

This issue is more autobiographical than the other Issues - that's deliberate. The maps we carry aren't simply pieces of paper we look at when we need to find our way – they are invisible and operate in our subconsciousness – and they define how we see and engage with reality.

# The Maps We Carry

*How inherited maps shape our lives – and how presence helps us find our way.*

I graduated high school at the age of 18 with the seeds of my future life already planted. The values and narratives I adopted from my family, friends, and schooling had set the stage: choose the practical, established, secure career path. And so in my first year of university, without any real exploration of who I was or what I wanted from life, I made my choice – accounting.

To be fair, it's a top five nationally ranked program offering the challenge, security, and status of being part of it. But beyond the inspiration of ego and security, I had no idea where I was headed with it, what I wanted to do, or where I would do it – at that point I was simply following the same story as most others were. Accounting, the story said, was a smart choice.

So I pushed myself to achieve within the program: Student Body President, Honor Society, Masters Degree, CPA. I worked hard at something that wasn't natural for me – and in the process built the mental muscles for the technical, 'left-brained', rules-based framework of accounting and its larger economic cousin. In themselves, stories that we'd all bought into.

As I began my career, I continued to listen to these stories guiding me down the path, but the road became more difficult to navigate. Experience after experience left me wondering what the point of it all was – the monotony and administrative nature of the work and the indifference and sometimes abusiveness of the culture was leaving their mark on me. I felt disillusioned and heartbroken – I'd worked in school and set myself up for success, only to find that success wasn't so easy to define in the 'real world': the people were miserable, and the pay was hardly enough to live on – especially in a city like San Francisco.

The questions I had were subtle but felt: What's the point of working so hard when doing so makes you numb to life itself?

As with every other college student, I had stepped into a ride following tracks laid down by the systems\*, like a car-ride at an amusement park that I couldn't get off of. I was making choices without knowing why I was making them.

Eventually I got off the accountant ride and jumped into another – the lawyer ride. And much like my decision to become an accountant, being a lawyer was exactly what the system said I should do.

## The Invisible Maps We Follow

The stories I followed weren't unique to me. In fact, maybe my experience sounds familiar – even just 'normal'. What we often refer to as normal seems to me to come from the mental models embedded in how society functions. Each of us absorb them as we make sense of society and life in our youth, without realizing they're there. In the first article, we traced how some of these mental models developed from hunter-gatherer communities to our global civilization today, recognizing their incoherence with life. In this article, we will explore the mental models that we don't often realize we are navigating our lives with – these are the 'maps' we carry.

These maps operate at both collective and individual levels.

The collective maps are the base maps – the foundational mental models. They show the topographical features of our experiential landscape of life – figuratively speaking, the mountains, lakes, rivers, coastlines, deserts – and the major navigational routes that help us see what's possible. They tell us what life is, how it works, what we can expect from it.

These mental models are loaded with assumptions and fortified by stories we adopt largely without question, in part because we are offered no alternatives. They are the foundation of the structures built around us – economy and money, nations and organizations, communities and family. And they carry embedded narratives about the relationships within and between these systems: "Nature is a resource." "Growth is infinite." "Money has value." "More is better." "Life is dangerous." "Death is to be feared."

In this virtual map, different parts of the map relate to different aspects of our experience. One part shapes our relationship with ourselves, another our relationships within family, another our relationships with work and career. It is, in short, a very large map with a variety of different topographical conditions corresponding to the landscape of our society and our lives.

The individual maps then layer onto the collective map. Think of them as the smaller routes – the streets and backroads – that intersect with the larger highways on the collective maps. Quicker to build, less trafficked, more personal. They tell us how to navigate our particular circumstances: how relationships work in our family, what success looks like in our community, what's expected of someone like us, how to engage in the specific relationships of our lives.

These can feel deeply personal, and they often are – but they are still built upon the topography of the collective map and carry its assumptions forward. Sometimes our routes get adopted by others, becoming well-worn paths in their own layers and even in the collective map below.

Both map layers are constructions of the human mind. In each moment, in each interaction, we make meaning and decisions that are filtered through them.

Even when I felt I was choosing my own path – what job and what location – the choices were largely shaped by maps I didn't know I was following. That these maps are invisible is what makes them so powerful. Without awareness of the assumptions, stories, and narratives that are framed within them, our view of life becomes increasingly separated from its reality. Not because free will doesn't exist – but because it can't operate on what it can't see.

***Truth is a pathless land. — Jiddu Krishnamurti***

## **The Map Is Not the Terrain — and It Never Was**

As a leadership consultant, I've worked with teams on the current landscape of business and the world at large. We often use the acronym "VUCA", which stands for volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. It was first used by the US Army War College to describe the shifting global landscape of national security interests in the late 1980s.

VUCA remains an important descriptor of what we face today, but the destabilization is now far wider and deeper than it was then. What we are experiencing now is less about a change of the order on the map, but the growing dissonance and conflict between the map and the terrain it claims – but fails to – represent.

This mismatch has grown over time – we've just missed the signs.

If you've read Issue #1 - *The Age of Incoherence*, you'll have seen what some of those signs look like at a civilizational scale. That collective incoherence plays out in the incoherence in our own lives. But without a way to reorient on the actual terrain – most of us will continue to follow the only maps we know. The ones we've been carrying. The ones we never thought to question.

If we begin to question and understand these maps, with openness, attention, and presence for the ground we are standing on, we can begin to take our first steps toward real orientation with a compass more aligned with nature itself.

My entry into law school planted the seeds for my own orientation.

## **Sensing Truth**

I began law school with vague notions of what I would do with the degree. Whatever it might become, I was leaning into the international arena – combining the J.D. with an LL.M. in comparative international law. The program took me abroad for deep cultural and professional experiences in Asia and Europe. It was the law school education I wanted, and maybe the only version I could have tolerated. But as I returned to the North Carolina university campus from the UK, something had already begun to shift within me.

Months earlier, as I ran marathons in Europe, and then cycled from Geneva to London, I decided that I would step into the world of triathlon and work towards the full Ironman distance races. The Ironman event was a fantasy I'd carried since childhood, watching competitors struggle across the finish line on the NBCSports coverage. And so alongside my final year of coursework, I squeezed 20 to 35 hours per week of swimming, cycling, running, and strength training into my class and study schedule.

The coursework required mental focus and endurance. The Ironman training required physical and mental perseverance. It was both exhausting and exhilarating. One day, as I walked through the campus, musing about an unsatisfying grade I'd received or maybe earned, an underlying insight arrived: the statutes and court opinions I spent hundreds of hours flipping through, and the grades from the exams that I was struggling through, were fabrications of humanity – the entire system was a map and a story that enough people had bought into. The legal system, careers, education...all of it. This isn't a criticism – it was a product of thoughtful people over many generations responding to their understanding of their environment, further deepening the map for future generations. But it was still an abstraction that represented the workings of our minds that we all adopted as organizing principles for life – even if the system itself, though based on the premise of justice, was infamous for its lack of equity and compassion.

In contrast, with Ironman, at that point, I could feel Truth. One that reached down into the ground, and operated with the basic laws of the universe. Gravity, force, inertia, momentum, energy, adaptation, and blood, sweat, and tears. There was no faking it. You either grinded through the hours, reached down and pushed through as hard as you can – lifting, pulling, pedaling, striding – for hours and hours, or you wouldn't make it. It was raw and undeniable.

Through it, truth had become something I sensed and embodied in each moment, rather than something I was told or believed I knew. Endurance tested my entire being and spirit – the lessons became increasingly clear.

And so I chose to spend the morning of my graduation commencement swimming, biking, and running to a local half-Ironman finish, before I rushed back to campus with my cap and gown. It was three weeks after I'd finished the Boston Marathon, and three weeks before I competed in my first full Ironman in Brazil. It was a fitting cap to the end of my legal education and a prelude to what was waiting for me.

## **Feeling Connection**

My legal career began much as my accounting career had ended – in capital markets. \$170,000 of debt assured me that I needed the higher salary – but there was no love for the work or the firm. This was the handcuff that came with the deal. This time in Hong Kong.

I joined a legal team I had never met – my summer associate program was in London with a global British firm, but I chose to start my career in Asia. The U.S. practice consisted of five associates and two partners. Our team area was known by the rest of the office as the “Dark Corner.”

The badge of honor in that Dark Corner was boasting about never having gone home to bed. The remedy was alcohol at the bar across the street. The process was control, resignation, and indoctrination. The result was disconnection, depression and heart attacks – literal heart attacks.

The machine was made for billable hours, not for human health, connection, or understanding.

For months I tried to build connection and understanding – It never came. In my fifth week I served up a piece of my traditional birthday pumpkin pie with a blot of whipped cream to each of them, I received not even one acknowledging glance.

One late evening around 2am, exhausted from a stretch of consecutive late nights, and with nothing urgent on my docket, I went home to sleep. The next morning I found myself in the hotseat at my own desk – the senior associate standing over me as he gestured angrily – “We work non-standard hours here!” That phrase rang through my head for years.

As I later found out from another associate, the group had conspired to ‘break me’. I would describe the culture in the practice as a toxic mix of arrogance and dominance over other humans. Connection in this context seemed impossible - with oneself, with others, and with the larger systems of life.

The consequence for me was a shift away entirely from the legal field into something more human, more humane. The consequence for one of the two partners was a heart attack in his office.

I later ran into that Senior Associate who yelled at me – he acknowledged that his life in the legal field had never been his own to direct. He himself was trapped and isolated.

Years later, I ran into another associate from that office at a wedding in Bali – he looked ill, gaunt and pale. “At least I have a Maserati,” he quipped.

In that practice, and what I was experiencing across the modern systems we call “life”, was a void of felt relationship and meaning. In fact, in our careers it’s clearly messaged that ‘feeling’ has little to do with what happens at work. That we are measurable mechanisms of production. Billable hours is the valued output. Relationships that were strictly in service of production were sanctioned and supported – anything more independently human might be tolerated, but is never truly accepted within the fabric of the system.

In Hong Kong, I found moments for connection, but they came mainly in the mountains on the island. The paths that climbed up the mountains from the central business district through, up along 'dragon's back' and down to the southeastern shores of Shek-O beach. The contrast was real – amidst the hustle of the crowds going to work, to the bars and maybe dinner, and eventually back home – it was the steps, the sun, and the wind in the hills that spoke to me.

## **Perceiving Freedom**

Stepping away from a legal career I had worked so hard and sacrificed for wasn't easy. But there was also something incredibly freeing about it – aside from the six figure debt I was still carrying. As difficult as it all was to accept, I knew that my sanity and long-term health were far more important than any sunk cost. I needed to feel human.

My journey began in a regional talent acquisition role in Hong Kong and then Singapore, where I opened their office. Over time, however, it became clear that the transactional nature of the business, day in and day out, was increasingly dissonant with who I was becoming.

“Close the deal!” was a mantra that reverberated not just in that firm, but seemingly across the entire economic system – one that set the stage for collapse in 2008-2009.

Freedom, if we can see it, often accompanies collapse. Seeing new possibilities can be the most important but most difficult part of “freedom.” It requires letting go of roles and positions, material things, and expectations. Being present in these moments opens up new ways of thinking and being that are responsive to the conditions around us.

For me in that specific moment, it meant engaging with life – so I took a cycle trip in Spain. And within a month, I found myself with an offer to teach US Corporate Law in Pamplona for a semester. An entirely unexpected turn in my life – but one that generated so much energy within me.

This level of free exploration of career and life opened a new understanding for me about how I could live. No longer was I being guided by tracks laid within the system, following the major byways of the collective map. The security I once thought I needed fell away against the open spaces of life – no longer captive, I felt like I was moving toward a new way of living.

My life became more of my own – to define, create, and respond within. So after finishing that semester, I returned to Singapore and took another turn that was self-directed, into transformational consulting and leadership coaching. I co-founded a sustainability advocacy group and spoke on matters of climate and systems to the public.

This journey had taken me from the toxicity of big firm legal practice into a space of creativity and purposefulness. And it was a progressive realization that the systems we've been told to

follow were not benefiting me, others, or the planet – they were benefiting themselves. The stories serve the systems. The deals I was closing were simply a part of those stories.

I was seeing these relationships more clearly, as well as how I wanted to be in response. And within that I was perceiving freedom not simply for occupational choices but freedom to author my own existence – movement and relationship – with life.

## **Orienting in Adventure**

From sensing truth, to feeling connection, to perceiving freedom – I was beginning to experience life outside of the systems that I had been conditioned into. The whole of it felt like an adventure, and maybe not such an unusual one, but one I was walking through with increasingly open eyes.

And as I looked around, not just at my life but at the collective experience, a different understanding began to take hold. We were facing a polycrisis, or what some refer to as a metacrisis – at all levels of humanity.

Temperatures are increasing, species are extincting, usable water and other ‘resources’ are shrinking, while national debts are rising and wealth inequality is ballooning, democracies are struggling, and people are suffering. These conditions are the connected consequences of humanity’s systems – affecting not just our collective and individual experience of life, but the entire supraorganism that is our planet’s ecology.

By 2022, I’d been experiencing an unraveling in my own life for several years from another toxic circumstance resulting from many of our systems. I was feeling shocked, traumatized, and disoriented – and there seemed to be no avenue to resolve it. The foundations of what had seemed like a normal life were crumbling beneath me.

To save myself and the person I held dearest, I left Singapore for the emptiness of nothing. No plan. No ideas. Space and presence were the only things calling me. It felt like I would have been fine just floating around in the dark of space for a while.

But on planet Earth, where there is gravity holding me in place, I had to take steps in some direction. But which direction? How to be when all I really wanted was to simply ‘be’. For the next two and half years, I traveled around the world. A solo expedition, often deep in nature – forests, mountains, deserts, jungles, and coastlines.

I bathed in cold mountain rivers and lakes, dug holes to poop in, slept under the stars, and found ways to set my mind to a different frequency of life. One that felt more coherent with simply existing.

The adventure wasn't in the topography, it wasn't in the landscapes I found myself in. It was in the ontological terrain of life beyond the maps. It was stepping into a new way of understanding that had very little precedent or model to follow. And it was letting go of what I'd been told was true – or at least holding onto them much more loosely.

## **Sprouting Seeds for Coherence**

I was searching for a 'home' – places in the world that made sense, that I could find physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual rest and recovery in. What I didn't realize was that I was slowly building that home within me. I wasn't fully aware, but I could sense that pieces of meaning and connection were coming together. Over time four words kept peaking into my consciousness: Truth, Connection, Freedom, Adventure.

I began to understand them as principles for living life. Over time, it became more clear to me that these orientations were not new understandings, but deeply rooted natural capacities to orient ourselves in the uncertainties of life. Capacities that modernity has increasingly overwritten.

### ***Truth as the capacity to sense the present reality we are in.***

*Modern society has replaced present sensing with stories and narratives that serve those systems, not us.*

We are sold products, services, and images of ourselves that we are told we should want to possess, experience, or be, rather than to be understanding and attending to ourselves in the reality of the conditions we are in.

We are told we should seek acceptance and strive for increasing status through social structures and technology that amplify and magnify their importance, instead of the capacity to see ourselves and the importance of what is actually before us.

Media and social media have reduced the capacity and willingness to address the truth of ourselves and the systems in which we actually live, focusing instead on whatever is either pleasing or more often hate and fear inducing, sinking us further into stories and narratives.

### **Connection as the capacity to feel and express within the emotional and energetic fields of our lives.**

*Modern systems across the professional and personal hemispheres have increasingly separated us from what mattered most for our health and survival over millions of years – our capacity to feel, relate to, and understand ourselves, others, and nature.*

Technology and social media have amplified this separation creating isolating and reinforcing narratives and fragmentation with a polarizing environment that reduces and often inhibits connection, empathy, and a capacity for presence.

Our economic and career systems have further isolated us from each other, including with walls and cubicles, individualized transportation systems, and a transactional mindset that sacrifices our deep capacity to feel and understand.

We are conditioned and educated with linear thinking – that events follow in sequence and relationships are direct and simple – separating us further from the non-linear reality of life's complex web of relationships.

*Connection draws from the first orientation, Truth, for without it, Connection is performative and unconnected to the terrain of life.*

**Freedom as the capacity to perceive and interpret the present conditions of reality within and around us, independent of any adopted or assumed narratives.**

*Modernity has conditioned us to adopt social norms, narratives, ways of thinking, and entire systems as reality and as too costly to stray from – while telling us that we have freedoms, but only if we continue to function within those systems.*

Our education systems are designed to prepare individuals to perform in an extractive and polluting economy – the highest paid and generally highest status jobs are the ones that often do the most damage to life. Meanwhile, the ones that are most inherently gratifying and aligned with the health of society and our environment are often paid the least.

Social media and technology have promised new freedoms of thinking and access, but have coerced youth and adults alike to conform their thinking through algorithmic echo chambers, the desire for belonging and peer pressure, and fear and hate-focused misinformation. This has reduced not just levels of empathy and connection, but critical and creative thought.

Economically, the reinforcing effects on income and wealth disparity are creating a neo-feudalistic society, fusing economics with technology. These dynamics are increasingly trapping the vast majority of people into a live-to-work situation in which they feel they are 'treading water' across almost every aspect of their lives.

*Freedom, to be engaged fully and authentically, must be built upon the stable ground that Truth and Connection provide.*

## **Adventure as the capacity to orient oneself to step forward into uncertainty and the unknown with vibrancy and courage.**

*Our social systems tell us that uncertainty is dangerous, that power and control are good. This serves the systems, but rarely does it actually serve us – keeping us within the bounds of the system’s rules and design.*

This begins early, as parents seek to protect their children from harm of all types, but inculcate a culture of fear within their children, families, and communities. The systems help to reinforce this culture and benefit through us staying the course – and being “safe.”

Through adolescence and adulthood the “keep in line” culture continues through education and peer social and professional groups, where standing out and being creative gets singled out and ridiculed. Social media has exacerbated this trend, as teen-depression and suicides continue to increase.

Collectively, the system works to maintain itself by keeping us functioning within certain bounds – what is known – and what works for it to function. Whereas the presence of Adventure supports the courage to step into the unknown, where life happens beyond our systems of control.

An orientation of Adventure engages the essence of our life-energy. It is the spark that fired our evolution and development, regulated by natural laws, not the laws of human construction built on fear and control.

*Without the presence of Truth, Connection, and Freedom, an orientation of Adventure is simply beyond the scope of conscious possibility.*

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Our systems suppress and overwrite these natural capacities with those we’ve noted above. But our natural capacities, like the growth of vegetation through concrete, will continue to push forward through the cracks. And as those cracks in our systems continue to get wider, I believe we will see our natural capacities pushing through. They may manifest as protests, rebellions, and even revolution – to reclaim our natural capacities for Truth, Connection, Freedom, and ultimately for Adventure.

Yet our systems have spent centuries if not millenia developing, cementing themselves deeper into the constructs of our existence and mental models, defining how we see life and ourselves within it.

In the face of our constructed systems of incoherence and their continuing collapse, the real challenge for humanity will be how we individually and collectively respond with presence and an orientation that is aligned with the life systems, as our ancestors had done for hundreds of thousands of years.

## **The Incoherence Experience**

Building on the first article, which focused on the evolution of humanity's incoherence, I've highlighted here my experience of it in some of those systems. In response, we briefly explored the natural capacities within us to orient ourselves within the complexity and uncertainty of life, but that these systems have overwritten.

My life is not unique in this regard. Over the past decades, more and more people are feeling the dissonance of life as they know it in our modern systems. And today we are seeing the cracks growing in real time.

We can understand the texture of incoherence in our felt longings – for what's missing. Truth, Connection, Freedom, and Adventure – the natural capacities we explored above. It manifests within us in feelings of anger, depression, and general anxiety. It shows up in increasing immorality, corruption, conflicts and violence. It expresses itself through levels of physical, social, and mental ailments. These are the consequences of the natural biological systems, that are each and all of us, being in perpetual conflict with the systems our egos created. Systems that are increasingly unstable and incoherent, yet effective at blinding us to their operation and their attribution.

This is in contrast to the more natural coherence in our relationship with life that existed, some might say, before the development of conscious thought and ego, and that accelerated with the advent of agriculture. That's not to say that life was easy, but it was sustained for hundreds of thousands of years as Sapiens and millions upon millions before that. And over the last circa 10,000 years, that is 0.33% of our species' existence, we have increasingly, rapidly, developed systems that are incoherent with the life systems that are now billions of years in development.

In the next article, *The Deficit*, we explore the developing nature of the instability gap between levels of systemic coherence and complexity over time, and how we might respond with presence in the face of its consequences. The aim here is to shine a light on what has been humanity's developing collective blindness to and misunderstanding of life itself.

***Coherence isn't a destination.  
It's a way of meeting life as it unfolds.***

\*I speak of systems, as do many people, with the assumption that we generally know what we are referring to. For clarity, I would define them as collective relationships that form functional groups that perform a function and/or result in outcomes, even if they aren't formally titled as a "system". Economic systems, governance systems, transportation systems, ecological systems, and also religions, organizations, teams, families, and individual organisms.