On March 19, 2005, I picked up my laundry at a local cleaner. The young woman at the cash register, perhaps in her early twenties, was listening to the radio as she gave me my change. She laughed at something she heard. Explaining her laughter, she said, “If you’re rich and famous, you can get away with anything.”

“Like the president of the United States,” I said.

“Exactly,” she said, and laughed again. “Mass murder.”

If the young woman had pursued an advanced degree in political science at a major university, she might have learned that mass murder is okay. The fact that she has so far avoided that form of “sophistication” is auspicious for our future. We need to amplify voices like hers, to remind us that the emperor is naked; mass murder is not okay.

Axioms have that kind of simplicity. Axioms are fundamental statements, requiring no proof, that can be used as a foundation in developing a larger conceptual framework. Axioms are often self-evident, yet very powerful. A good axiom, in the hands of a check-
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out clerk who knows how to use it, could probably hold a Harvard professor at bay.

One of the reasons that intellectual commentary on world affairs is often so shallow and confused is that it is so often based on dubious premises. The axioms are never examined. In *On Equilibrium*, John Ralston Saul illustrates this problem using reference to Solon, a wise political leader of ancient Athens, who resolved an economic crisis by taking action that was intuitively necessary but strongly opposed by some wealthy and powerful people. Saul suggests that today’s “experts” would explain to a contemporary Solon in great technical detail why the action (which would solve the problem) would not work. These experts might have university degrees and a long list of scholastic achievements but have lost touch with the kind of wisdom expressed by the young woman at my local cleaner. Saul points out that such intellectuals can easily arrive at a “false sophistication” in which “the complexity of [the] methodology obscures the naivété of [the] assumptions.”

So it is important to keep our basic premises, our axioms, in mind and to re-examine them from time to time. One such axiom was well expressed by Alfred Korzybski in *Science and Sanity*, published more than 75 years ago. He reminded us of something basic about how we think, so basic that it is extended here as the first axiom essential for thinking about the world and how we influence it. Korzybski used the word *map* in much the same sense that I have used the word *paradigm* — a way of thinking about something.

**FIRST AXIOM**

*The map is not the territory.*

It is worth remembering (and it is true whether we remember it or not) that our concepts of the world are not the world itself. Any way of understanding reality is a set of abstractions and not the reality those abstractions represent. Our concepts of some
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aspect of reality have the same relationship to that reality as a map of the Rocky Mountains has to the Rocky Mountains. The map is not the territory.

Accuracy in the factual details of the map is essential, but the map represents only selected aspects of reality, no matter how accurate its details.

What the map represents and what it omits depend on the purposes the map is designed to serve. Some maps will depict the hiking trails in an area; others, the location of mineral deposits. Some maps will emphasize the great benefits a government has conveyed; others, the atrocities the same government has committed. If I want you to support a particular government, I will probably emphasize its virtues. If I want you to help replace or destroy that government, I will probably emphasize its failures or atrocities.

The stated purpose of the map may be quite different from the real purpose the map is designed to serve. If the stated or implied purpose of the map is contrary to its real purpose, it is a false map. A map purporting to show hiking trails or mineral deposits might omit all representation of those features from one specific area if the mapmaker does not want them to be known. Propaganda for war does not come labeled as such.

Words such as peace and democracy generally evoke a positive response from the public, but they can be false maps if the peace and democracy referred to are in a framework of illegitimate power and oppression rather than of international law.

Another way of expressing the first axiom is “We think in generalities but life happens in detail.” Take for example the concept of free will. For a given situation, I might think that I have a choice about what to do. This book is based on the assumption that readers have a choice about what to do with their lives.

The concept of free will is a very useful map, yet with some effort we can discover things about the real world that don’t seem to fit the map. Current concepts in neuroscience view our consciousness and thinking as dependent upon the release of chemicals
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(neurotransmitters) at synapses (connections between nerve cells) in our brains. Obviously we are not consciously making the arrangements to release the neurotransmitters or to carry out the other physiologic events on which our conscious decisions depend. What we experience as consciousness and free will is dependent on something that scientists have only fairly recently described in physiologic and molecular terms — phenomena that remain invisible and largely unknown to us as we experience our exercise of “free will.”

Thus neuroscience brings us a map that is remarkably similar to the one expressed in Matthew 6:27–29: Like the “lilies of the field,” we are part of something infinitely larger and more detailed than we imagine, and we are dependent upon that reality. We are part of the flow of the universe. That’s a different way of thinking about free will and about ourselves, a different map, and that map also serves a purpose: it can give us an appropriate humility. By learning to use the two maps alternately and with facility and for human purposes, we might acquire a dimensionality and depth to our lives and our actions, and enrich our appreciation of the world. Like Socrates, we can learn not to assume that we know something we do not. And even as we acquire that modesty of spirit, we can begin to know ourselves a little better.

SECOND AXIOM

*The map changes the territory.*

Although the map is not the territory, it does change the territory. “Ideas rule the world” is another way of expressing it. The way we think about the world and about ourselves profoundly influences our behavior, and our behavior influences the world around us. By choosing to think of ourselves as powerless, we set the stage for a life of wasted potential.

In the Vietnam War era, public relations experts for the U.S. government presented a neat map to the American public. To
the growing skepticism about the Vietnam War among many Americans, the experts responded: “If you knew what we know but cannot tell you, then you would rally in support of this war.” It was called the Big Picture: “If you had the Big Picture, you would understand why we must pursue this war to a successful conclusion.”

Of course, the government in Hanoi also had its own Big Picture. Robert McNamara, then Secretary of Defense for the U.S. government, later (with the wisdom of hindsight) had this to say about the Big Pictures:

The incomprehension seems to have been total and absolutely consistent. Washington and Hanoi, in other words, ... were thus wrong nearly 100 percent of the time.... The fundamental enemy — the root cause of the agony over the Vietnam War — was mutual ignorance. (McNamara et al. 1999, 381)

Yet there were many citizens of the United States who were wiser at the time. They were skeptical of the Big Picture. They didn’t get their skepticism from having done a doctorate degree at a prestigious university. Their skepticism was born of immediate necessity — the possibility that they or a friend or a member of their family might soon die in Vietnam — and for many of them, from a sense of responsibility to fellow human beings, not only those in the United States but also those in Vietnam. Their resistance to the ignorance, arrogance, and violence of their government, the U.S. government, also changed the territory. They established what are sometimes called “facts on the ground.” It became increasingly difficult for those in positions of power to manipulate public opinion.

What a person thinks about herself or himself has a profound influence on the course of history: not only on that person’s own history but on the history of the human spirit. When one person,
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or a few people, demonstrate that something can be accomplished which previously had never been imagined or had been assumed to be impossible, that achievement establishes a historical fact.

There was a time when women were thought to be unfit to vote or to participate in public life. Various “compelling” arguments supported this point of view. Today it seems merely quaint. History was changed because of people who were able to think outside the box of an old paradigm, and then act on what their imagination told them was possible. Their maps changed the territory.

What you think about power, and your relationship to power, also influences the course of history. Uncritical subservience to power produces a pathology of powerlessness, which supports the pathology of power and accounts for a great deal of violence in the world. One of the mantras for the pathology of powerlessness is “You can’t change the world.” And by accepting that doctrine of impotence, the person making that choice gives *de facto* support to the pathology of power. They do in fact change the world, moving it toward Option B. Your way of thinking about power will profoundly affect your life and work.

Far too many citizens voluntarily surrender their role and their responsibility in a democracy, abandoning the course of world affairs to “leaders” and “experts.” The doctrine of impotence can be found both in impoverished and in wealthy societies. Distracted by the demands of a career, consumerism, or the daily struggle for survival, or driven by an ideological deference to power, citizens become marginalized. Relinquishing their own power and intelligence to leaders and experts who are thinking inside the old box, these citizens become part of the pathology.

You have your own maps about who you are. If you choose to think of yourself as powerless to do something important that is in fact well within your power, you will influence the course of your life and the course of history by making that decision. You change the territory of who you are by your way of thinking about who you are.
THIRD AXIOM

We choose our maps.

No one can force you to accept the doctrine of impotence. Consciously or unconsciously, we choose our ways of thinking about ourselves and about the world. And that makes all the difference.

We use maps to find our way from one town to another; we also use maps to find our way from dawn to dusk. By choosing a map that includes a defined goal and the necessary daily priorities that enable us to reach that goal, we can accomplish things we otherwise could not achieve. We have become who we are largely because of the ways of thinking we have chosen. If you are highly skilled at choosing and designing mental maps to serve your purposes and your needs, you will be better off than if you lack this facility.

FOURTH AXIOM

Good, bad, evil, important, and unimportant are in the eye of the beholder.

Which team won a particular sports event will be a question to which the fans of both teams will give the same answer, though their feelings associated with the answer may differ. Which team won is an empirical question; rational observers will agree on the fact. Their maps will be identical on the answer to the question. Whether the outcome of the event is good or bad cannot be answered conclusively because the essence of good and bad is emotional, not factual. The maps of different observers will differ on the issue. Whether the fact is good or bad is in the eye of the beholder.

In the natural sciences, empirical questions usually cannot be answered with the certainty of the outcome in sports events. It is standard practice to accept as fact a conclusion that has a probability exceeding 95 percent of being correct. If the evidence indicates that the probability of an association between cigarette smoking and lung cancer is greater than 95 percent (the contrary
possibility has less than 5 percent chance of being true), then for working purposes scientists accept the association of cigarette smoking and cancer as a fact.

Cigarette company executives may dislike the fact. They may try to ignore, obscure, or rationalize it. They may make a sustained and strenuous effort to gather evidence to the contrary, because of how they feel about the fact. It might even be possible to establish by an opinion survey that most people feel very passionately that the association of cigarette smoking and cancer is a bad thing. They wish that cigarette smoking were not associated with lung cancer. That they have such feelings could then be established as a fact. But is it really a bad thing that cigarette smoking and cancer are associated? That is not an empirical question, because the essence of bad is emotional, not factual.

Does this leave us with nothing but moral relativism? Obviously not.

Physicians conduct their professional work based on recognition of the value of human life. The resulting formal, operational set of ethical standards enables outcomes that (we assume) are experienced as good by most of those who are affected by the practice of medicine. A neurosurgeon evaluating a patient who is losing consciousness and considering an operation to control an intracranial hemorrhage to save the patient’s life is not distracted by doubts about the value of that life.

It is in human eyes that human life has value. But those are our eyes. Major spiritual texts, international human rights law, the medical profession, and human empathy all recognize the fundamental value of human life. That awareness seems to be at the source of the world’s major religions. But again and again this recognition is obscured:

To this day Christianity remains divided between those who embrace Jesus’s teachings of love and forgiveness as the foundation of Christian morality and those who invoke
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the name of Jesus in the pursuit of righteous vengeance, imperial conquest, and authoritarian rule. (Korten 2006, 122)

Spiritual maps have been falsified to serve the purposes of militant nationalism. It is time to restore the authenticity of those maps.

Those who have written intelligently about evil seem to share this basic concept: evil is what destroys human life and creative potential. This emerges in the work of Albert Camus, Hannah Arendt, Scott Peck, and Roy Baumeister, as well as more theological works grounded in one or another religious tradition. It is implicit in the entire field of books on spirituality, psychology, and self-help.

For purposes of the map presented in this book, good is associated with fostering human well-being and creative potential, and promoting the conditions of global community necessary to sustain them. Even so, those are words, and words that sound very similar can be used to persuade people to destroy human life and creative potential. Instead of using the standards of international law, a persuasive leader can simply use a much more permissive and ambiguous language, such as “fighting for freedom” or “saving the fatherland” or “manifest destiny.” Self-righteousness is a deadly affliction. An awareness of destructive tendencies within ourselves is an indispensable competency for the future of human survival.

FIFTH AXIOM

*Political leaders are not competent to determine the value of a human life.*

Much of what we value in life depends on the unique contributions of another person: sometimes a writer or an artist, sometimes a scientist or physician, sometimes a person who advanced the conditions of human well-being we now enjoy. And sometimes it is just someone who has made a very large difference in our personal
life. Each human life harbors something unique, potentially a gift that no one else can bring to the world.

Presidents, prime ministers, and other political leaders are not remotely competent to know the value of even one of the millions of lives their policies affect. This is a simple statement of an obvious fact and, in the present context, an axiom. The same concept applies to religious leaders. It is not for popes or presidents to determine the value of a child’s life. The same incompetence can be found in the experts who advise them, the intellectuals who attempt to justify their policies, and the soldiers who carry out their orders.

Robert McNamara identified a failure of empathy as one of the major reasons that the Vietnam War was so protracted, so destructive, and such an utter waste of resources. If you lack empathy, you carry within you the fatal flaw that can produce a downward spiral of violence in the future. In medicine, empathy for the patient is formalized in the ethical basis of the medical profession. In power politics, there is no such formal constraint. A physician must bring his emotions under control in order to behave professionally for the benefit of the patient. In politics and in political science, the suppression of empathy and emotion plays a much more questionable role.

Human emotions are immediately relevant to the ethics of daily decisions. Emotions can be inflamed to serve destructive purposes, as in propaganda for war. Emotions can also be suppressed to serve destructive purposes, as in so much of the political, military, and intellectual work leading toward Option B.

Responsible citizens need to be aware of the human costs of their government’s violations of law — exactly the awareness a militant nationalist culture tends to suppress. This includes awareness of the human costs to combatants and non-combatants, not just to “our troops.” It includes awareness of the costs to future generations of a lawless world. Awareness of the human costs of warfare is essential to responsible global citizenship. Another
way of stating this is that responsible citizens are aware of their own limitations: they know that they cannot know the value of a human life.

How effectively we can evaluate commentary from our “leaders” and “experts” during a war depends in part on how immediate our own experience of military violence has been. Many readers will have had no experience of that violence, yet are exposed to military analysts and other old-paradigm commentators in daily broadcasts of news and commentary. Such commentators often seem to be emotionally unaware of the human costs of the events they talk about. Suppressing public awareness of the damage “our troops” are inflicting on fellow human beings is essential to effective war propaganda.

If a failure of empathy is a major cause of warfare, then journalism informed by empathy is a necessary antidote to propaganda for war. That’s why such journalism is so valuable to the practice of global citizenship. In the following story, journalist Paul William Roberts describes his visit to a children’s ward in a Baghdad hospital shortly after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and his conversation with the hospital’s only surgeon about an Iraqi child.

Her name was Amina. She was four years old. A bomb had fallen on a house where she lived while she was walking home from the market with her father. Shrapnel and flying glass had smashed and slashed her to pieces. She had not yet been told that her father had died of his own wounds.

“As you see, we have not any bandage here any more…. We must use what we have…. We have no anaesthetic to give her,” said [the surgeon]. “And no anti-bio. She is in shock, you see, so is feeling nothing really.” He paused and sighed. “She will die today. Yes, I am certain of it…”

The brown pool of that eye in its frame of bloody rags was looking straight at me. Something leapt the space
between us, some form of communication. There was a little girl in there, a little girl whose body had been broken and torn. A little girl about to die.

… Could anyone look at this little girl and say that what had happened to her was justifiable? I would like to see the manly men of Pentagon and White House take their photo-opportunity with little Amina, explaining to her that, painful and cruel as it may seem, the cost — her cost, not theirs — was worth it. (2004, 199–200)

In what follows that passage, Roberts tries to imagine what Amina might have accomplished and what she might have enjoyed, had she lived. His empathy informs his journalism and brings to his readers one set of “data” essential to making wise decisions. Roberts considers the possibility that Amina might even have discovered a cure for cancer that might have saved the life of George Bush’s granddaughter. For the individual case of Amina, such a possibility seems remote, though there is little doubt she would have made important contributions to the lives of others. As the number of lives derailed by political violence increases, the probability of losses to the field of medicine and other fields concerned with human well-being also increases.

Millions of stories similar to Amina’s remain untold. The waste and carnage of power politics is beyond the capacity of a human mind to grasp. The statement “One death is a tragedy, a million deaths is a statistic” indicates the human inability to grasp the enormity of decisions involving political violence.

Most of us would not want to board a ship or an aircraft if the captain and crew had a reputation of violating the rules of the high seas or airways. We expect not only competence but also compliance from individuals in positions of such responsibility. Yet we vote for leaders who, in their policies, threaten human lives. We do this in part because we think that no other options are available.
Politcal leaders are not competent to determine the value of a human life, but they are competent to bring their government’s policies into compliance with international law. Political leaders therefore face a de facto choice: they can act within their competence or outside it. They can emphasize the necessity of international law for the security of all, or they can ignore, obscure, or rationalize their government’s violations of international law. The first choice leads toward Option A, the second toward Option B.

Human emotions underlie all human thought and endeavor. A mathematician experiences the proof of a theorem as “beautiful”; Henry Kissinger describes power as “the great aphrodisiac.” It is essential to understand the pervasive emotional forces at work in political events and their potential to undermine or enhance human well-being. Political leaders learn to influence emotions. The mesmerizing effect of Adolf Hitler’s public speeches is well known to historians of that era. Contemporary political leaders are selected in part for their charismatic qualities. Public relations experts help with shaping their messages, using phrases that for the intended audience will trigger strong positive emotions. Depending on the audience, the president’s or the prime minister’s speech is salted with phrases such as “struggle against tyranny and terrorism,” “the fight for liberty,” and so on. When such phrases are being used to support major violations of international law, they are treacherous, however seductive they may be.

If citizens are ever to live up to their responsibility to humanity, they will have to develop some critical skills, including an ability to see through the rhetoric of “us versus them.” They must become aware of their own limitations and those of their political representatives, and the consequent necessity of compliance with international law. Otherwise their lives, their fortunes, and their honor will continue to be sacrificed to illegitimate power. When they learn just how badly they have been fooled, it will always be much too late.