

'Jitske Kramer doesn't simply describe the modern experience of burgeoning cultural change that is infected by tricksters and false prophets, she also offers sound advice for handling it all. In these times of relentless uncertainty, one thing is certain: we need this book.' – Robert Cialdini, international bestselling author of *Influence* and *Pre-Suasion*

'In a world where the ability to adapt is paramount, Kramer's insights provide a valuable compass for anyone seeking to lead through the complexities of transformation.' – Erin Meyer, *New York Times* bestselling author of *No Rules Rules* and *The Culture Map*

'Jitske Kramer offers a completely original, challenging, and practically useful take on change. *Tricky Times* has the power to transform you and your organisation. Approach with excitement!' – Stuart Crainer and Des Dearlove, founders of Thinkers50, 'the Oscars of management thinking' (*Financial Times*)

'Jitske Kramer is the most important thinker you've never heard of. *Tricky Times* is her breakthrough.' – Joris Luyendijk, anthropologist and author of *Swimming with Sharks*

'This is everything you wish for in a non-fiction book. Well-written, with new insights and concepts. Jitske Kramer shows that there are hopeful answers for chaos and crisis.' – Daan Roovers, philosopher and former Philosopher Laureate for the Netherlands

'A striking and extremely relevant book about these times, a liminal period towards a new way of living.' – Herman Wijffels, former chairman of the Dutch Social-Economical Board, and professor Sustainability and Societal Change

'The jury was impressed by the author's ability to convey such a complex story in an engaging and accessible style. These days, everyone seems to be searching – and this book offers exactly the course in getting lost that we need.' – Jury report Best Management Book of the Year

'Jitske Kramer combines deep, penetrating analysis with a style of writing that is widely accessible. *Tricky Times* offers a thought-provoking diagnosis of our current condition but also indicates ways out of it. It deserves a wide readership.' – Bjørn Thomassen, Professor in Global Political Sociology at Roskilde University

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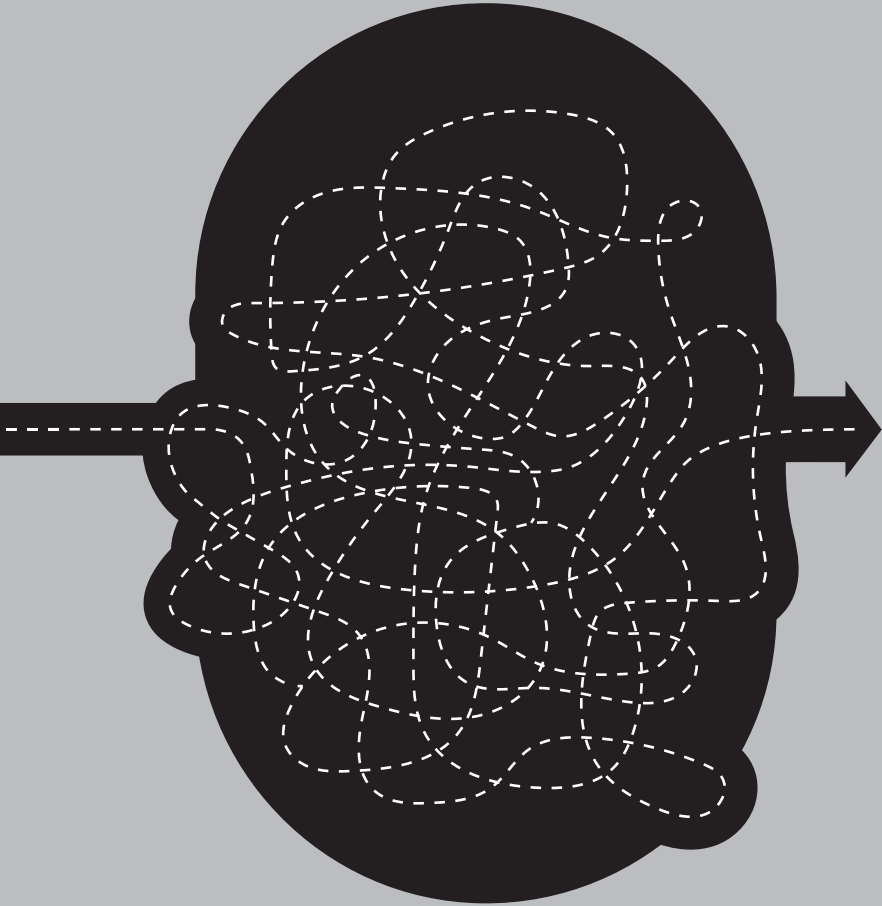
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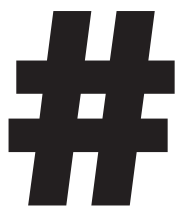
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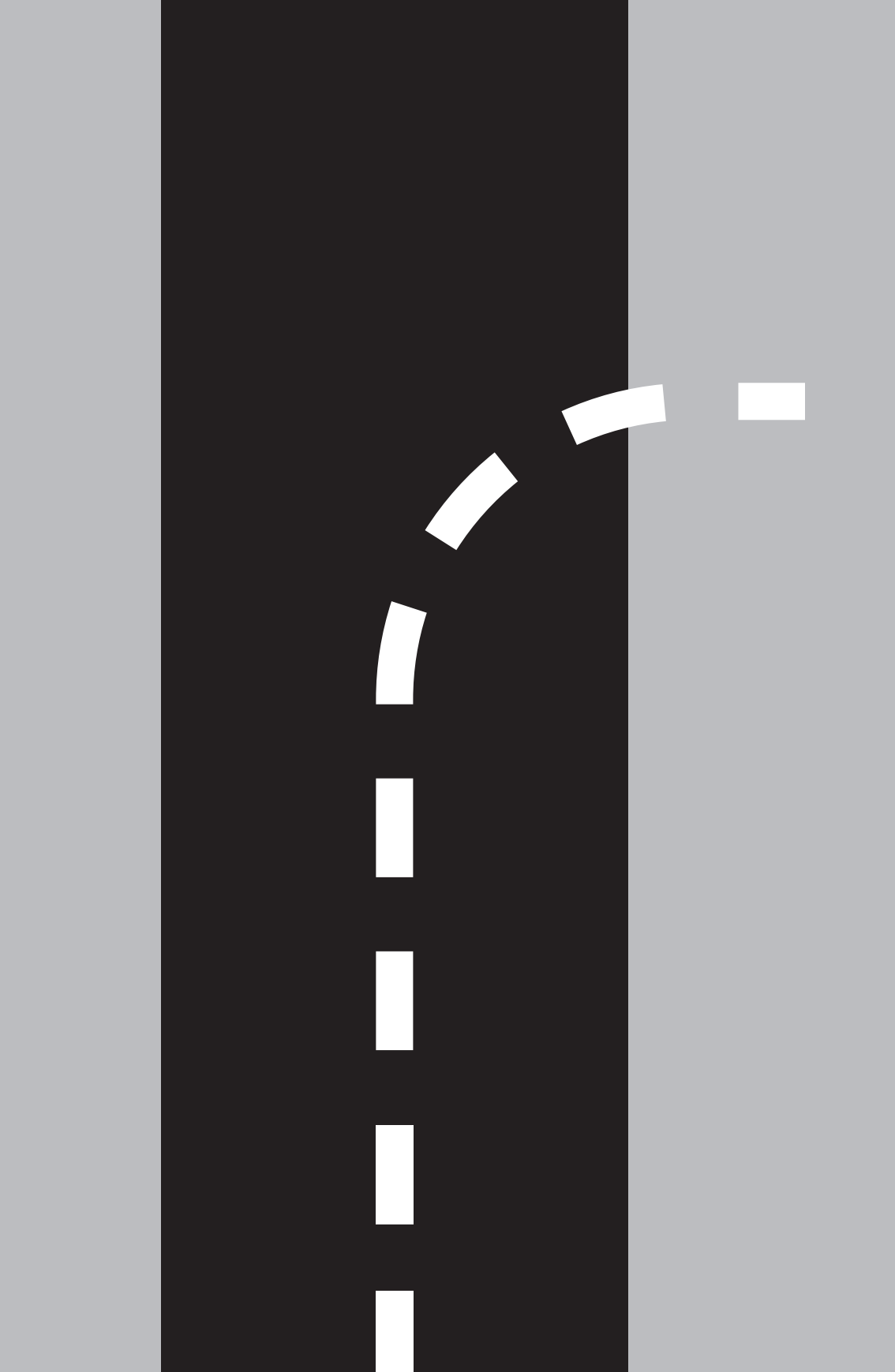
INTRODUCTION: WHY WE CAN DO BETTER



I admit, I envy people who ‘have it all figured out’. The kind of people who confidently analyse complex situations *and* present an instant fix. Who hold out maxims and concrete tips you can use today, all positively framed. Who talk in soundbites, have a targeted model ready and a practical five-step roadmap to lead you to where you want to go. Many times I find myself more on the I-am-not-so-sure side of things. Even to the point of tears. Especially when the issues are complex and consequential for my own and everybody else’s life. When different sides are at odds and findings disagree, when there is no middle ground, when truths are skilfully spun, financial stakes and research interests are murky and all kinds of arguments and emotions get tangled up together, I am thrown into doubt. How can I possibly form an opinion amid all the competing perspectives? What is true, what’s not, and what is reasonable? It’s maddening when you can no longer work out who or what to believe. We are at a moment in time when many long-simmering issues have more or less simultaneously boiled over into crises. A climate crisis, an energy crisis, a cost-of-living crisis, a food crisis, a housing crisis, a biodiversity crisis, a labour crisis, a refugee crisis – I could go on. All of these problems are bound up together and the solution to one will impact the others. This book is the fruit of my fieldwork, as both a traveller and an anthropologist, into the tricky transitional period that surrounds consequential changes.

As a cultural anthropologist, I want to understand how people shape cultures, how cultures shape people and how groups of people contend with change. In my work as a speaker, I visit all kinds of organisations, both in the Netherlands and across the world, where I apply anthropological knowledge and know-how to organisational cultures. You could also call me a corporate anthropologist. Looking at the world these days, I am troubled by the increasingly hard-line attitudes around many issues and the fierce emotions they unleash. Public discord is growing and is infecting our private lives as well. We all yearn for more solidarity, humanity and connection, but our calendars are too crammed to make it happen and our tempers too inflamed to truly listen. I see it in myself, too. I'm continually harping on newspapers, the aggressive tone taken by politicians and the empty promises held out by every kind of leader. I am disturbed by how easily I am swayed by bullshit stories, marketing ploys, window dressing, half-truths and wild tales. The worsening aggression against first responders angers me, the way we are treating the Earth and our environment saddens me... Fortunately, I am optimistic by nature and simultaneously buoyed by all the terrific initiatives I also see, by my beloved's smile, by the way the young people I talk to are taking charge of their future. I feel like it is sunny in my head most of the time and most people are pretty decent. So then, why are we humans getting stuck in so many ways?

Anthropology has the ability to illuminate and lay bare things we know but cannot yet put into words. By observing and listening more closely, we can detect patterns that connect people and issues. These patterns form a kind of life map or cultural photo that offers a reflection of a specific group, in time. Revealing the patterns is about showing reality without making it Instagrammable first. Each person in the picture can decide if they are happy with what they see when they look into this cultural mirror, or not. A cultural analy-



LOST BUT NOT FORSAKEN

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To begin exploring the discord I sense in society, I first needed to understand the system we are in, starting with the question what is actually wrong with it? Simple enough, I thought, but before I knew it I was tumbling from rabbit holes into bubbles and forced into a realisation of just how complex our modern lifestyle is. In too many areas, the distinction between fact and fiction has become blurred. Never before had I realised how profoundly every aspect of our lives is shaped by the prevailing economic system; a system that now seems stuck. It's as if we have become lost amid all the possibilities. It scares me to think we may no longer know the way. But that's the feeling that comes over me when I look at the big changes that are needed. We have the numbers to back it up. Worldwide prosperity has surged in recent decades, but at the high cost of exploitation and pollution. Many people are working in appalling conditions. We have been crossing swords for centuries over what is humane, but if we come to a point where the Earth is truly spent, the question becomes moot. So, who is benefiting from the current system? How can we all coexist better? How can we keep the Earth habitable? Where do we start? Can we do it painlessly? The way we design our economic system is too important to simply leave it up to economists.

1.1 | CULTURE: ORDER IN THE CHAOS

Our world seems to be stuck in an endless loop of rising poverty rates, unhealthy diets, outdated agricultural models and limping healthcare systems. Every problem seems to unleash yet another. These are wicked problems, so called because they are complex, seemingly contradictory and there are no obvious solutions. Some call for a 'system change', often ignoring the fact that existing systems were created by people and are a reflection of what our societies once valued, or still do. Rather, the change we need is in ourselves, in our culture. And that is very tricky. If you look through an anthropological lens, you start to see that seemingly unrelated incidents, protests and escalations in society are all part of a larger, interconnected whole. Humankind seems to be ready for a new step in its development, but how do we change ourselves? Let me start by showing you how I, as an anthropologist, look at groups of people, at culture creation and culture change. Using this anthropological lens, we can start to make sense of society, the economy and all the crises happening now.

Order in the chaos

Cultures don't just drop out of the sky. We make them together. People shape cultures and cultures shape people. Cultures are systems of meaning. They tell us about aesthetics, what is beautiful and what is not. They tell us about morality, what is right and what is wrong, what we should believe, what is true and what is false. Culture gives us unique answers to all sorts of universal questions so we won't have to rethink everything all the time: what is good leadership, how do we conceive of time, how should we coexist fruitfully, deal with male/female differences, the lures of wealth, the natural environment and so on. Every group of people down the ages has formulated slightly different answers to these same human questions.

Given that nothing has meaning in itself, people have to imbue life with meaning together, and every group does that a little differently. The most basic questions are how we can coexist peacefully and how we can cooperate fruitfully. A society's unique answers shape its particular culture. If the environment changes or culture evolves in such a way that those answers no longer fit, people have to go in search of new answers. That is culture change.

Decisions about what you do and don't value are made as a group, family, organisation or society. In organisations, it is usually a directed process involving whiteboards and flip charts. In other areas of life it's less targeted and shared values seem to emerge of their own accord. These kinds of values tend to be universal and involve things like 'respect', 'enterprise' and 'integrity'. Most important is which of these values end up in your group's top three. It makes a big difference whether your family puts 'sport' or 'creativity' at number one, because those values feed into norms that, in turn, shape your collective behaviour. Culture provides ground rules for members of the group. The same values can give rise to different behaviours in different groups. Take 'respect', for example. Does it require shaking hands, bumping fists or bowing? All groups develop norms of behaviour, however different they may be. Some are so absolute they become law. These are rules that, if you break them, you pay a fine, go to jail, are punished or get sacked. Other rules of behaviour are less strict, but still important. The group uses peer pressure to send the message that overstepping these rules is not okay.

So, we have values and we have norms. They form the nucleus of a culture, of the collective story we believe in and the shared patterns of behaviour that guide our actions. We design the world around us based on what we value, embedding our collective story in a physical reality of buildings, landscapes, procedures and systems. Also