

# **The Little Book of Self-Organisation**

Personal field notes from my experiences with Pioneers of Change, a five year old collaborative social experiment in self-organisation.

**“Life, in its essence, moves towards plurality, diversity, interdependence, self-constitution, and self-organisation - in short, towards the fulfillment of its own freedom.**

**Throughout time, humans have built and reproduced systems of production, types of society, and frames of mind, that contradict Life.**

**While we are taught to work within such a system (and the system learns to work within us), both our intuition and our senses tell us that it is fundamentally flawed, and that we can do something about it.**

**We can change the rules of the game.”**

**- Pioneers of Change Charter**

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## « Context: The Paradigm of Cultivation vs. War »

“Cultivation as an alternative paradigm to war for facing the future is different not only because it is ever constructive, but also because it is constructive by means of being respectful of context and paying close attention to detail. It is not like a moonshot, which is essentially an exercise in decontextualisation through the creation of a self-contained environment. Few things in life are like moonshots. Most things are not like that, cannot be made like that because they are too complex, too dependent for their success on paying attention to and interacting with context, to the external environment – including the needs of other people – rather than subduing it by blasting through it. Because it examines context, cultivation requires attention to detail and because it examines context, cultivation requires attention to detail and interaction with that which is being cultivated, be it a school, a child, a tree, a car, a factory.”

- Max Dublin, Futurehype

“Is it really our duty to add fresh ruins to fields of ruins?”

- Bruno Latour

We wake up in the morning wary at the news of fresh wars, fresh killing. We wake up trying desperately to insulate ourselves to the events that are unfolding around us. People try and convince us that things are generally ok, others try and convince us that we live in genocidal times. Our minds, hearts and societies have become battlegrounds.

War has become a paradigm, an organising principle for society.

The paradigm of war in essence demands that we go to war against all problems, that we marshal resources, fill war chests, prime our propaganda, mobilise our armies and spur on our heroes. In our time we've witnessed the war against drugs, poverty, AIDS and of course, the ongoing war on terror.

When I first came across Max Dublin's notion of a paradigm of war I was electrified because I could see so many examples of this paradigm unfolding around me. War talk and war thinking dominates our public spaces to such a degree that we've become desensitised to any other way of doing things. Reading Dublin I suddenly became aware of the water that we swim in. I understood that so much of what happens in the modern world, from schools to think tanks to business planning, draws on the paradigm of war for its underlying rationale, for its very substance.

When we boil this paradigm down to its bones we find that it assumes battle as being the primary mode of human interaction, both with ourselves and with the world, with nature and the universe as a whole. It posits a universe that is hell bent on destroying us, with our vocation being to fight back “tooth and nail.”

This final vision is a belief, you either believe it's true or you don't. For me, I simply don't believe it. The paradigm of war is misguided and the thinking that derives from it is intrinsically destructive. It's this thinking that unfortunately dominates our time and it's this thinking that I believe we need to shift away from.

The alternative to the paradigm of war that Dublin explores is that of cultivation, or of Eros, “who is commonly regarded as the god of love, but in this context can be more generally thought of as the god of connectedness.”

Cultivation is different from war because it demands not heroic actions but *sustained acts of will*, it demands that we pay attention to context and to details. Dublin argues that all failures, “be they in our ability to build cars or to make love, are based on failures of cultivation, on nurturance.”

These few details are enough for me to imagine a paradigm of cultivation within which the basic interaction is that of relationship, of interaction and of love, and not of battle. Even though I’m not a farmer, it seems pretty clear to me that a farmer who cares for his or her land operates on a different paradigm than that of war. A good farmer works in harmony with the land, works to cyclical seasons, pays attention to the richness of real life, to soil and to weather. Diversity is a farmer’s lifeline and s/he knows the fragility of a monoculture. The success of a farmer’s crop depends on an ability to sense; to notice details and to not fight them but to work with them. To plant the right crops for the right season, to give the land a rest when it needs it and to bend with the wind during a storm.

Self-organisation is an experiment in cultivation. It’s about taking our ideas for how to organise from nature and from Eros, the god of connections.

Beyond all the words, I feel the truth and validity of this experiment strongly. It might not always work and succeed but it’s worth investing in. I feel that it calls us back to who we are, to honestly listen to ourselves and what we know is whole. I feel that I’m just beginning to open my mind and heart to the possibilities of cultivation and self-organisation as ways of being and acting. As such I remind myself that we’ve only just began and that it isn’t yet time to call the result, to curb the experiment but rather to keep pausing and taking stock of where we are, which is what I’ve tried to do here.

## « Why Self-Organisation? »

Hierarchies have become the key organising principle of the paradigm of war. This organising principle reached a screaming peak of popularity in the modern 20<sup>th</sup> century. Now though, at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century hierarchies have a bad reputation. They're simply not cool and for good reason. Hierarchies, as most of us have experienced them, are painful, de-humanising and increasingly ineffective -- in part because they're better suited to mechanical systems and not to the complex systems of today. Even though today's hierarchies have become more and more sophisticated, they still have a stale 20<sup>th</sup> century smell about them. That smell is the smell of decaying institutions and the cause of decay is their use of hierarchies as an unquestionable organising principle.

Times have changed.

We're no longer happy being cogs in a machine.

We want things to change, we want systems which treat us as mechanical units of production to treat us like the human beings that we are.

This is our starting point. The inevitable question that follows is 'how do we change things?'

### « *The Nature of The Change* »

The change that we want to see is a shift from *closed, deterministic, mechanical, lower order systems* to *open, non-deterministic, complex, higher order systems*.

A key difference between a lower-order system and a higher-order system is the internal 'logic' or consciousness required to understand them, live with them and ultimately shift them.

A clock, which can be very intricate, is nonetheless a lower order system when compared to, say, a pond ecosystem. This is because the logic that drives a clock is relatively simple, you can write down the equations that govern it, its behaviour is predictable and linear. A lower-order system can be understood and managed through rationality, it's behaviour can be codified and replicated endlessly.

On the other hand a higher order system operates by a different, non-intuitive, non-rational logic -- it exhibits non-linear behaviour. To work with a higher-order system requires rationality and much more besides, qualities that only a human being can provide.

There's no room for a higher-order element in a lower order system because by definition it would no longer be a lower order system. An assembly line is an example of a lower order system and in such a system all elements, including human beings, must be treated as if they're lower order elements.

We need to remember that a complex system is also, by definition, a system that's fuzzy -- especially when compared to a lower order system. When confronted with higher order systems which are fuzzy we have historically been taught to apply non-systemic, linear logic to the problem. This results in frustration. We want a sharper picture, we want to be able to write down the equations that govern a system. Our modern mental make-up demands that problems be clearly defined and the route to the solution be as clearly defined.

For better or worse that era is over. We need to get used to complex, fuzzy systems where the question of ‘what is to be done?’ has no *obvious* answer.

Part of the challenge then is to shift ourselves to the point where we become more able and skilled in dealing with complex systems, in cultivating what in a deterministic system might be called a *result*, which in a complex system might simply be a *consequence* or a *precipitate*. We need to be aware of situations where we slip into linear, deterministic modes of thinking, we need to become more familiar with the discomfort that the uncertainty that complex systems cause deep within our psyches.

I can recall instances where people have criticised Pioneers of Change for not being clear enough. While being open to such critiques we need to remain conscious of the fact that some degree of fuzziness comes with the terrain, it’s, in some cases, a very necessary characteristic of complex systems. Eliminating this fuzziness too early in the name of clarity also has the undesirable effect of killing potential courses of effective action before they’ve had a chance to emerge. Rather than seeing fuzziness as something bad to grow out of, I think we need to be able to discern when it’s an utterly essential characteristic of the particular phase that we’re in and when it’s simply our own lack of clarity. The degree of fuzziness in a complex system may vary but eliminating it altogether means a return to a lower-order, deterministic system – in other words the system has shifted from being alive to being mechanical and is in a sense, dead.

Of course once suitable courses of action have emerged we need to have the fortitude to act. However, we need to “learn to sit in the messiness for *a while*” - - not forever, just for a while. The question of how long we chose to sit in the messiness is an open one. Each of us has a difference tolerance for how much uncertainty we can cope with. We need to remember, though, that the dominant culture has *very little* tolerance for *any* uncertainty and this is all too often reflected in our own behaviour. We need to increase our tolerance for uncertainty while ensuring that we don’t get totally lost or paralysed by uncertainty.

It isn’t that we should discard rules, logic or rationality but rather that “we should criticise the dominance of these phenomena to the exclusion of others in [modern] society...”<sup>1</sup> If I seem to be demonising rationality then I’d like to be clear that I’m not demonising rationality as a human capacity, rather my objections to it are historical and structural. Specifically, I believe that the “dictatorship of reason in the West” has been incredibly damaging for human society around the world (while simultaneously being materially rewarding for some).

Similarly, when I criticise the notion of hierarchy, I’m pointing out that a particular form of hierarchy, that is, the hierarchy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which derives itself from a 20<sup>th</sup> century understanding of the paradigm of war is what’s damaging – as opposed to the notion of hierarchy in its broadest and most natural sense. Nature makes use of hierarchies and we need to ask ourselves what the difference between a natural hierarchy and a military hierarchy really is.

A mistrust of hierarchy is something that permeates our time and this is true, to some extent, within the culture of Pioneers of Change. One problem with the lack of hierarchy within Pioneers of Change means that those who have more experience and skill within the community are not recognised in any

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<sup>1</sup> Bent Flyvbjerg, Making Social Science Matter

formal way. We may need to very carefully and consciously re-claim the notion of hierarchy from the paradigm of war if we're to make use of the differences that exist within Pioneers of Change.

My point is that criticisms of certain paradigms, capacities and organisational forms need to be considered in a historical context. They should not be mistaken as absolute statements that are true across space and time.

As an organising principle, self-organisation suits Pioneers of Change because as a community we're concerned with *systemic change*, which is a higher order problem and purpose.

### « **Definition: The Group vs. The Mob** »

Self-organisation doesn't mean that people come together to form a group and then collectively decide, from scratch, what it is they want to do together.

We need to make a distinction between what I would call a group and a mob. The difference between a group and a mob is around one of purpose and intention. A group shows signs of higher purpose, whereas a mob shows signs of animal purpose. For example, in instances of communal violence a mob may be very single-minded about lynching, say all the Jews or Sikhs in their neighbourhood. A group on the other hand will display signs of a higher purpose be it, systemic change or feeding the hungry.

How do we distinguish between animal purpose and higher purpose? A mob operates on the basis of fear, while a group operates on the basis of love or *eros*. This demarcation between a group and a mob is fluid and not rigid. What I mean is that a group can degenerate into a mob very quickly and a mob is notoriously difficult to work with. A core part of making self-organisation work involves ensuring that a group that comes together as a group does not splinter and become a mob.

The distinction between a group and a mob is not simply one of differences and dissent. I recall an instance at our annual meeting in Egypt 2003 when a friend intervened, fairly violently, as we were discussing our purpose. His intervention was clearly driven by a fear that we were going down the wrong road as a group. Such an intervention or dissent on its own does not transform a group to a mob, but it has the very real *capacity* to do so. If, due to such an intervention, the group loses sight of why it has come together and instead starts operating on the basis of fear then in a very real sense the group has fractured and become a mob -- as it very nearly did in Egypt. When this happens the very dynamics of the group changes. A mob functions very differently from a group. In a mob power rules, whereas in a group some form of collective sense rules.

In short, a group demonstrates consciousness and higher purpose, a mob does not.

### « **Self-Selection: Be Explicit, Not Exclusive** »

In any complex system the only parameters that can be controlled are the starting conditions. While there is rarely a clear 'right' and 'wrong' -- the starting conditions, the "initial conditions at birth," in effect determine what happens. Self-selection is, in part, about setting the right starting conditions and so can be thought of as the first principle of self-organisation.

Animals and plants might not have free will but humans undoubtedly do.

One reason hierarchies are politically redundant as an organising structure is due to the fact that they're an effective way of compelling behaviour from those with less power, that is, they're good at making people do things that are not necessarily in their self-interest. Things that, if the decision were up to them, people would never do -- like sitting in a muddy trench waiting to be shot or herding people into gas-ovens.

We live in an age where our eyes have been opened to the folly of following orders blindly -- if someone gives us an order we want to be in on the logic of it. Why are you asking me to do this? If it makes sense to us we'll do it. If it doesn't we don't want to do it. The reality of freedom, of living in a state where

we do what we want to do makes much more sense to us -- we want to be masters of our own destiny, we want to be the heroes of our own life and not cogs in an industrial machine.

Of course few people truly have this freedom but it's an aspiration that shines from our television screens and our media day in and day out. It's no longer an unimaginable situation but rather one that feels real, even if it hovers just out of reach, tantalisingly close.

Self-selection aims to ensure that individuals will undertake actions only when such actions are in alignment with their integrity, with their values. It aims to create a state of enlightened self-interest. The theory being that this will result in more effective action, action that is driven by the whole of an individual's being and not by fear.

If an individual is being coerced; psychologically, physically, socially or economically then the notion of self-organisation falls apart, it becomes oxymoronic, a sham. Self-organisation makes no sense if behaviour is being compelled.

So much for the theory. We've learnt from hard experience that self-selection isn't an umm simple matter.

Early on, we simply allowed people to decide for themselves if they wanted to join a particular programme or not and operated on the (Open Space) assumption that "whoever comes are the right people". My feeling is that this principle works well within the context of an Open Space session but not in convening groups with specific purposes. Deeper intentions need to be discerned.

While the words 'self-selection' may lead us to believe it's a matter of simply saying 'yes' or 'no' to a proposed course of action -- the fact is that people quite often don't know if an action is in alignment with their integrity or what they want at the time. Often it turns out that a participant thinks the answer is yes and when probed more deeply it turns out that they're saying yes because not enough information was provided for them to make an informed decision or even because they've always wanted to visit the country the meeting is being held in.

There is then the critical matter of what people are saying 'yes' to -- especially when the intended outcome or proposed action is not clear, as is often the case in a complex system.

Self-selection is a process of facilitated self-reflection.

It means asking questions which help clarify a participant's intention and need. It means acting as a mirror of sorts in order to determine if attending a particular meeting or joining a particular programme with all its twists and turns is really what an individual wants to do. Facilitating self-selection means being highly conscious of taking on the role of a mirror -- it isn't about what you want or what you believe is right for a gathering but rather trying as honestly as possible to get an individual to see what it is that they need at that time.

In addition to asking questions and eliciting information, the process of self-selection means providing the right information. This information can range from details of a proposed agenda to the programme fee or even the weather.

There are no hard and fast rules as to what information to provide other than more is usually safer than less.

Being skilled in the process of self-selection means listening below the surface and learning what questions to ask and what information to provide. Like any art, the more you practice the better you get.

### « **Role: The Convenor** »

The task of a convenor is to form a group through issuing a good invitation.

Typically the convenor is someone who has discerned that people share some greater, common purpose that is of interest to all of them to gather around. The convenor is ideally someone who people trust in this role, someone people value for pointing out what is of interest to them.

If a convenor keeps calling people together and people keep discovering that the purpose of the gathering is not of interest to them then they'll stop coming. A good convenor will issue invitations which are clear. This is what you're being invited to, this is why it's of interest and this is why you should come.

If a convenor is bringing people together because they think that the invitees share some beliefs then it makes sense to state these beliefs explicitly. (Such as the beliefs in the Pioneers of Change Charter).

A convenor should also try and make it clear to people what type of event, meeting or gathering they're being invited into. For example, are they being invited to a straight-forward discussion? Are they being invited to a highly structured event with an agenda? Are there aspects of the meeting which are mandatory? What are the non-negotiables?

It may be that the convenor has some gut instinct which is hard to articulate as to why a particular group of people should come together. However if it doesn't become obvious relatively quickly then the group will splinter.

A good convenor will keep getting it right and build reservoirs of trust. In time people will be happy to gather because a good convenor has called a meeting. Experience has taught people that it's in their interest to come. A good convenor is worth their weight in gold and hard to find.

Of course once the convenor has sent out invitations and received responses back then they need to initiate a process of self-selection -- as opposed to simply assuming that everyone who wants to come is coming for the right reasons. It may be that the convenor takes on the role of facilitating a process of self-selection, they may invite a facilitator or even a team of people to do that.

## « Responsibility: Owning your own learning »

Self-organisation requires a high degree of responsibility from the participants. If participants have made a clear, conscious and informed decision to engage through a process of self-selection then this necessarily means sharing responsibility for what happens. If the process of self-selection has been weak then a participant might feel, early on, that they're not responsible because, for example, they were not provided some key piece of information.

In Egypt 2003, a few people came because they thought that the entire meeting would be run as an Open Space process. Upon arriving they discovered that only a small part of the meeting would be Open Space. As a result some of them decided that they couldn't really be responsible for any of the meeting outcomes since this wasn't the meeting they had signed up to. Of course this was their decision. Having arrived they could also have decided to 're-negotiate' their understanding of the meeting. Either way, no one could really accuse them of not taking responsibility since they had, in effect, never agreed to it in the first place.

A key challenge in responsibility being shared is that we're not used to this. Typically in a hierarchy the people at the top take responsibility or very clearly delegate limited responsibility for certain tasks. To be in a system where you're responsible for what happens can be frightening. It becomes more frightening, or frustrating, if you don't clearly know how decisions are made within the group. Often people who feel alienated from the group will not speak out because they're afraid and it isn't clear that they'll be heard even if they do speak up. Responsibility can only be taken by participants if there is some mechanism for decisions to be made within the group.

Pioneers of Change has an open culture, which means that it's very vulnerable to abuse. I recall an open planning meeting for a programme. A friend of mine who really didn't know much about Pioneers of Change or about the programme decided that he wanted to come along in order to "see where he could help." He ended up asking a lot of very basic questions (for example about why Pioneers of Change was structured the way it was and so on) and so taking up a lot of valuable group time. In effect what had happened was that he didn't come to the meeting to "help" but rather to learn. His way of learning though, put great demands on other people in the name of help. Instead of sitting and listening, he either believed that his questions were valuable to all the others present, or he didn't realise that his questions were only valuable to himself and no one else. The trouble, of course, is that an entirely open structure leaves itself open to such abuses. Taking responsibility in a group also means being highly conscious of your own contributions to the group. This responsibility is one of the principles of circle conversations, "Tend to the well-being of the circle by being aware of the impact of our contributions."

One sign of a well facilitated process is that people feel that it's natural for participants to take responsibility, to step forward where appropriate and to take on emergent roles which are of service to the group and its purpose. Another sign of people taking responsibility is there being a healthy and clear fluidity of roles as people feel confident in stepping forward to offer what is needed and switching from being purely a participant to a facilitator and then back again. This fluidity reflects the fact that power is flowing within a group and is not being 'held' tightly by a few people as in a rigid hierarchy.

Finally, we need to remember that at one level the individual *cannot* take responsibility for everything that happens. The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman

argues that our institutions and politicians have abdicated their responsibility for systemic change and act as if the individual is solely responsible. We need communities because responsibility for systemic change needs to shift from the shoulders of the individual to a more appropriate body.

### « **Role: The Facilitator** »

The primary task of a facilitator is to hold the group to its purpose and ensure that the group doesn't lose sight of this purpose. Often individual agendas or dynamics will intrude violently into the group. The facilitator, while not ignoring such events, needs to ensure that they don't derail the group. If the group loses sight of its purpose then once again, it reverts back to a mob or splinters in some other way. The facilitator, above everything else, needs to ensure that this doesn't happen. That is what they are tasked with.

If the facilitator is a different person from the convenor (as they may well be) then it's useful for the facilitator to begin by re-stating the invitation in some way and hence re-visiting the original purpose of the group.

Early on I operated on the assumption that the convenor or the facilitator held almost all the responsibility at the start of a meeting and as a meeting progressed the task of the facilitator was to share the responsibility more broadly. I learnt that this, however, is too simplistic a picture and is in fact what a participant sees. For a facilitator, their role remains fairly constant throughout a meeting.

At one meeting I facilitated in Egypt 2003, a particular session upset some people. In the break I was aware of people 'gathering at the water-cooler' to talk heatedly about it. I felt that the issues needed to be recognised in the group and raised them as something that I personally felt needed to be addressed before we could move on. In hindsight raising the issue was the right thing to do, but it was a mistake to think that it needed to be somehow resolved before we could move on because it contribute in any significant way to the group meeting its purpose. It may have been something I personally needed but sometimes that isn't relevant to the group.

The way a facilitator ensures that the group remains focused on its purpose is through creating a safe space for people in the group to be themselves, or rather their higher selves, dedicated to a common purpose. This safe space is sometimes called a *container*.

### « **Self-Governance** »

I feel that Pioneers of Change has been particularly bold, some would say stupid, in opening up decision making to the volatile energies of the group.

It's worth remembering that there are many easier, less demanding, less strenuous ways of organising groups than self-organisation. Most of us have been institutionalised to the point where we're genius' at following orders. It would not have been so hard, over the last five years, to opt for the clean lines of a command and control model. People are familiar with this and in many cases prefer the security of such a model to the emotional chaos and responsibility that self-organisation seems to involve. To me one is clearly more human than another and that is another reason for taking the more difficult path of self-organisation. A distinctive governance style marks out a process that is self-organising from one that is not.

It's been extremely interesting for me to note that *Pioneers of Change* is not a democracy and nor does it show much inclination to head that way. Rather it operates on the principle of devolving power to those who will be doing the work and trusting them to make the right decisions. This is stated in the *Pioneers of Change* charter as follows "Authority should be vested in, functions performed at, and resources used at the smallest or most local part that includes all relevant and affected parties." Where a group does come together to make a decision the process is more akin to the indigenous way of talking until a conclusion that's acceptable to the group has been reached (this doesn't necessarily mean everyone is happy).

A key ingredient in all this is transparency. Meetings need to be documented and these documents made available to whomever wants to read them (at least that has been the aspiration, even if resource issues have meant that this doesn't always happen). People are constantly invited to take part in decision making processes and the feeling is that if they don't step forward then they also don't have much of a right to complain about something at a later stage. This transparency is a form of accountability to the larger community.

Governance in a self-organising system means bowing to the collective intelligence of the group over the individual intelligences of individuals (regardless of how important or smart a participant might be). Of course the challenge here becomes to ensure that the collective intelligence of the group surfaces, shows its face for long enough to make its presence and hence wisdom felt.

The dangerous alternative is that it does not show. In which case attempts by the group to govern itself can degenerate into mob dynamics, where the most powerful or the loudest individual, is able to sway the group's emotions in one direction or the other. I've seen this happen and have even been the person trying to sway the mob's mood. It inevitably fails in that nothing real or useful can come from a mob. When the moment passes, people rub their eyes and wonder what on earth happened. Deep commitments to transformative actions do not come from such states of being.

At a few *Pioneers* meetings we invited anyone who wanted to input into the process for the next day to meet at the end of the day. In Mexico 2002 this became frustrating because the session turned into an explanation of our most basic assumptions and experiences with programme design. At the end of a long, full day this proved quite tiring, at least for me. I guess that the lesson is that even such meetings need to have their parameters.

People engage in group governance for different reasons. I feel that if lots of people are present at such meetings then that might reflect a deep concern in the group about the way that things are going. A low turnout at such meetings usually seems to mean that the facilitators are doing their job well. Although again, there are no hard and fast rules for this.

In Egypt 2003 we tried using simple, non-verbal, voting techniques, more to gauge the mood of the group than come to any decisions. One of the most interesting of these was the line-up. Where you state a position, such as 'I think revolution is the answer' and then ask people to array themselves in a straight line which reflects their strength of belief in the statement. There's usually someone who objects to the way the statement is phrased, and we told those people that if they totally disagree with the formulation then they can opt out of the line-up.

Whatever the process, at the start of a meeting it should be relatively clear what the governance mechanism is. It may be that the group uses this governance mechanism to change the governance mechanism itself but that's the point.

### « Emergence »

A deterministic logic wants to *make* things happen. It demands results. It operates on a A causes B causes C type of logic. Complex systems, famously, operate on the logic that a butterfly flapping its wings can cause a hurricane on the other side of the planet. This being the case, it doesn't make that much sense to demand results when dealing with complex systems. Rather it makes much more sense to create the conditions for consequences or precipitates to emerge. Does this require an element of faith? For better or worse yes. But this faith is informed by the fact that we know all too well that deterministic logic doesn't work in complex systems.

It's our fears (often the product of our intellect), that nothing will happen, or that time is running out, which don't allow actions that reflect our collective intelligence to emerge. Instead we want to shift to a more 'action' orientated space, which is, in fact, nothing more than a shift to a sort of perverse instant gratification space where we want to assuage our fears before they eat us up.

The difficulty with reflective actions emerging in Pioneers of Change meetings has been that typically all meetings suffer from a shortage of time. Even if they're long, residential meetings of several days, it becomes hard to escape the looming feeling that we're running out of time for the 'action' phase of things. Typically this has meant an abrupt, lurching shift into action in the last few days of the meeting, which is inevitably felt as being too short a time for 'action'.

I'm not sure what the solution is to this issue. A part of it is certainly strengthening some of the processes outlined here. It may be that where this has happened the purpose of the meeting has been so unclear as to allow people to project their own meaning as to what it's all about. If the intention, when using large group processes, is to create a shared context for action then this should be made clear. If the intention of a meeting is the exchange of techniques, then again this should be made clear. It may also be that we need to be, for better or worse, tighter with our time keeping and clearly allocate a certain amount of time to planning and action.

Part of the trouble is that we need a common understanding that we're tackling systems where we don't know what action to take. If participants walk into a meeting believing that they know what should be done, without knowing the first thing about any of the other people present, then this is a problem because it prevents the formation of a shared context.

## « Coda: The Prison-House of Language »

Even though the notion of the universe as a clockwork universe has largely been discredited as a paradigm for seeing the world, many of our institutions and much of our training is still aligned to the picture of a deterministic, clockwork universe -- this means that a shift in our own consciousness is an essential part of the shift we want to see in the world. Achieving such a shift is the particular challenge of our milieu.

The essence of the challenge is the paradox of a culture which has analysed itself and discovered its own limitations. To put it another way, we have trained our consciousness into a box of sorts. This box represents “the most un-ecological and self-destructive culture and personality type that the world has ever seen,”<sup>2</sup> and our task is to break out of this box with our starting point being the very consciousness that created the box in the first place.

This shift, or movement, in consciousness can be thought of as an attempt to free ourselves from the subject-object duality that grew out of the Enlightenment and later became institutionalised during the Industrial Revolution. It's a movement away from duality towards unity, which is also referred to by certain Western philosophers as a shift from a non-participating consciousness to a participating consciousness.

This unity, or participating consciousness, is most often associated with the religions of the East, such as Buddhism and Taoism, although it is also a feature of many of the world's great religions including Hinduism and Islam. Due to the fact that this broad movement shares ground with Eastern religious practices, which was historically most enthusiastically championed in the West by the New Age movement, almost all contemporary Western movements which aim to transform consciousness seem to have been influenced, to varying degrees, by the New Age movement.

I, for one, believe that the New Age movement has been of some service in ensuring that a particular beacon of consciousness has been kept alight in the popular imagination of the West. Regardless of its service, many movements today are in a rush to distance themselves from being labelled New Age because it's increasingly seen as a movement which has sold out and in some way lost its authenticity. In epistemological terms people distance themselves from the New Age movement because it seems to be stuck in radical pluralism, which operates an uncritical acceptance of all cultural practices. The label of 'New Age' is, in its most extreme, given to something that is considered shallow, uncritical and inauthentic.

It's interesting to note that today's social movements cannot authentically draw public authority from the New Age movement anymore, nor can it be drawn easily from the East, in part due to the commoditization of spirituality (which the New Age movement has been blamed for), and in part because the public sphere of (and in) the West is still relatively secular and hostile to the language of spirituality. Instead public authority needs to be drawn from somewhere else.

Ironically one key source of such authority in the West is science (or more specifically natural science) -- the very vehicle which historically epitomised rational, dualistic modes of thought . It is perfectly respectable, in the public sphere, to refer to complexity theory and other still more esoteric branches of

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<sup>2</sup> Morris Berman, *The Re-enchantment of the World*

science in an attempt to ‘borrow authority’ to somehow establish the authenticity of an idea, a movement or a particular culture.

Those, however, with any modicum of scientific training, despair at such usage. The reasons for this are varied. Setting aside reasons of ego and protectiveness, those who love science are not adverse to its wider usage, but they are adverse to its abuse, which is what typically happens when natural science is used as a form of justification for human behaviour or when it is used to wield power. The fact is that while modern science, such as quantum theory and complexity theory, do seem to lead us to the domain of unity (as opposed to that of duality) the path is a difficult one, full of subtleties and complexities which are typically ignored by non-scientists.

Natural science has authority in our societies because of its predictive power. When dealing with human affairs this predictive capability fails or is of little use. We need to remember that “human activity cannot be reduced to a set of rules, and without rules there can be no theory.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, natural science has limited applicability when dealing with human affairs and this fact is often forgotten in the zeal to borrow authority from natural science.

Pioneers of Change has, from time to time, been labelled as ‘New Age-y,’ mainly because of its use of dialogic processes, its use of a particular language of consciousness and systems thinking (such as I’ve used here) and its plurality. My initial feeling is that such labelling (when used to de-legitimise) is typically a form of laziness and fear, which usually reflects a surface understanding of the influences that shape a movement and ultimately its culture and identity. It’s far easier to label than to engage and discover or, heaven forbid, step forward and speak up. If Pioneers of Change bears a resemblance to the New Age movement then this is because both are concerned with a shift of consciousness and with non-rational ways of knowing.

It’s worth remembering at this stage that in contemporary Western society reason and rationality still rule the roost. All other forms of knowing struggle for legitimacy. We are required, in our public and professional lives, to be rational. This situation is, of course, changing but the point is that the dominant form of consciousness in Western societies (even those Western societies outside of the West) is reason and rationality. Pioneers of Change, along with many others, is engaged in a shift away from such dominance.

Beyond this initial feeling that labelling is a form of laziness, I’m increasingly convinced it’s a manifestation of fear. I think we need to be aware when the source of such labelling is a rational fear of the non-rational and when it’s an epistemological fear of losing oneself in radical pluralism.

Even so, my (and our as a community) use of language lays Pioneers of Change open to a number of charges such as of being New Age-y or, in my mind, the far worse charge of borrowing authority from science. All of which begs the question, why have I used the language of systems thinking (and thus of science) in this text?

The objection to using such language can be summed up by the saying “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” What I believe we’re doing is to prove this old saying wrong, we’re trying to dismantle the master’s house with the master’s tools – because the master is a prisoner in his/her own house.

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<sup>3</sup> Flyvberg

Pioneers of Change, for better or worse, functions in a public domain which is squarely Western, it operates (mostly) in a language, English, which is the language of reason and rationality. In the current milieu any movement which takes as its starting point non-rational ways of thinking, being and doing, will attract only the converted or those who never gave up their non-rational modes of consciousness. This, by definition excludes us, that is, young(ish) people trained rationally, who have analysed our own culture and discovered its limitations. To put it another way, we've started with ourselves. There is no where else we could have legitimately started. Because Pioneers of Change is concerned with systemic change, this necessarily means using the language of the dominant system in order to invite people, including ourselves, into a world where reason doesn't dominate (but learns how to take its place as one way of knowing amongst many others).

I'm clear that we're trying to use language as a way of creating situations and experiences which challenge us profoundly, and then making use of such shared experiences to break out of purely rational modes of being and doing. We are, of course, still learning how to do this.

The position then is to be on the edge of a wave of change, to create forward movement, to pioneer, without disconnecting from the whole. The difficulty in pulling this off is immense. On the one hand if those within Pioneers of Change reject the language of rationality entirely (which would include the language of complexity and systems thinking) then as a community we would close ourselves off to those who operate in rational modes, that is, a large number of people in the world. If, however, we operate primarily in a rational mode, then, as a community, we are in effect going no where and betraying our own purpose.

The skill lies in knowing when a particular mode is useful. When is non-rational knowing needed and when is rational knowing needed? How do we, as a community, engage in critical thinking without lapsing into a purely rational mode of being? How do we make use of dialogical processes without giving off the appearance of being 'all talk'? These are some questions to which the answers are not at all obvious.

The task of learning (or perhaps re-learning) such distinctions and skills, of re-knitting together rational and non-rational modes of being into a vibrant cultural fabric is in part what Pioneers of Change is about.

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