

**Aliveness And Spirit In Non Profit
Organizations: A Presentation To The
Concordia Summer Institute For
Community Development And
Management**

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Dedication

To Ben and Caitlin, may our paths always cross and intertwine, and may we be able to recount and listen to each other's stories. Without you both, these words could not have been imagined, let alone written.

I walk daily with your gifts.

*Into the rivers north of the future
I cast out the net, that you
Hesitantly burden with stone-engraved
Shadows*

Paul Celan

[Ivan] Illich lived what he believed: that each person is given a story to tell, and that nothing could be worse than to allow that unique story to be shrunk to a “survival rate” or reduced to an “assigned role”.

David Cayley

Vein-opening writers are putting not just themselves into their books, but themselves at their most nakedest and most vulnerable. They are putting their pain and their passion in to their books Not all writers do it all the time – even the blood bank recognizes we have only so much blood to give – and many good writers never do it at all either because for one reason or another they don’t choose to or they don’t quite know how to; it takes a certain kind of unguardedness for one thing, a willingness to run risks, including the risk of making a fool of yourself.

Frederick Buechner

*The weight of this sad time we must obey
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say*

The Duke Of Albany, King Lear

A Note To The Reader

These words, gathered together from past writings and reflections, and re-fashioned in the process, tell a series of stories, and raise a series of questions. At one level, this is the written text of a presentation that I gave at the 2005 Summer Program of the Concordia University Institute In Community Development and Management. At another level, this is the story, or stories, of my own personal journey of grieving over the past five years.

There is a certain organizational development logic to how the stories unfold. There is also a certain oral logic, story telling is meant to be out loud. At the same time, each section can be read alone, as its own story. In between each section, in a later edition, there may be shorter pieces, reflecting the power of other people's imaginations, written, or voiced at Concordia.

The story flow expresses my own journey of grieving of the past five years, a journey of engaging with profound loss and encountering Death. Five years ago, all of my roots were torn out, and my separate selves went flying into the night. In this journey of grief, each self needs to be reclaimed; and, in the reclamation process, re-fashioned as a stronger, healthier, more alive, centre. In other words, each self needs to re-find its own voice, and claim its own new story. This is what walking through deep crisis is all about, as a person, but also as an organization¹.

Along the way, many amazing people have walked beside me, some for a short while, others over the longer term. I thank each and every one of them.

Walking beside others in crisis is important. It is what I try to do as an organizational consultant. Perhaps this text, interweaving what I, and others, have reflected on about

¹ See, for example: David Hurst, Crisis And Renewal: Meeting The Challenge Of Organizational Change, Harvard Business School Press, 1995. Hurst suggests a flowing figure of eight, or double loop, as an organic metaphor for organizational change: birth, growth, maturation, crisis, confusion, and renewal. I have used this metaphor in many ways over the past five years.

personal and organizational crises may help others walk their own path. But in the end, the journey is always one's own, alone, "Alone with the Alone"².

² Henry Corbin, Alone With The Alone: Creative Imagination In The Sufism Of Ibn 'Arabi, Princeton University Press, 1969.

Jamaican Coffee

There are a myriad of details here,
epic poem going on and on. 55 years in all.
I have read it in different places, at different times,
late at night wrapped up in a scarlet button blanket,
early one morning, freezing pensively, stuck in the outhouse,
yesterday afternoon in the light rain, high on the rusty swing.
Even tried reading it backwards
hanging upside down from a tightrope.
Leaves tell a thousand stories. No river runs.

Wednesday, July 5. Hike off into the nearby hills.
The poem comes along tucked into my pack.
Stop by the waterfall to shower, shivering nude,
drink the dregs of Jamaican coffee made at 6:00 am.
I read the poem out loud, listening for echoes in the forest.
The river runs. The sun breaks through. And,
the cottonwoods whisper their secrets to the waning moon.

(July, 2001)

Yellow Bus

An old yellow bus trundles out of the desert
Jump on, jump on, the bearded driver calls out,
It is the trip of your life. Don't wait! Don't wait!
I clamber on, losing a clean beige Tilley hat
that falls out under the dusty balded tires.

Three women sit in a row in the middle
as if they were awaiting my tardy arrival.
They smile and nod and chat gaily, holding
stuffed paper shopping bags wrinkled with age.
Where is the first stop?, I ask in curiosity.

Right at the back, an old black grandmother
lies sleeping, snoring as if the centuries flow.
Kwumah, announces a name card, hanging
on a golden chain around her short rolled neck.
And, who are you?, I yell with crinkly laughter.

The bus rolls off in billowing clouds of dust.
Leaves me staggering drunkenly between the seats.
I choose a place to sit up front, where there
is light to see ahead. Laughter rolls out behind me,
and further back, deep belly belches of kasava cud.

A flock of crows lands on the dented roof
hitchhiking a collective ride to the land of
Where are we going?

(January, 2002)

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A Prologue: Conversations Matter

These few pages, the essence of a series of conversations with two friends about organizational and personal journeys, point to the critical importance of story telling, of conversation, whether with others or within ourselves.

Dear friend,

There are two different processes of change in organizations, two different flows. The first, more rationale and more formal, goes something like: troubles --> the need for change --> defining a future, even if only fuzzily --> then letting go, which means grieving what was --> then acting. The second, more irrational and informal, goes something like: troubles --> the need for change --> resisting, holding on --> then grieving and letting go --> then acting --> out of which a new future emerges. Facilitated events are almost always of the first kind, rational, talking, intentional,

In reality, both processes are always playing out at the same time, yet we cannot seem to face them at the same time because they are discontinuous frames of being and becoming. That is, we cannot hold both frames within us, consciously, at the same moment.

Dear Gavin,

Thank you for outlining these processes. It helps me to see this, and the word “grieving” helps me understand what it is that I am feeling and assume that others are. Last week I heard a woman speak about relationships. She said that: “We generally grieve for some time before the end of one – by the time it ends, we are often almost finished grieving.” That gave me a new awareness too. I think that this is likely true for all kinds of relationships – with people, with organizations, with identities, with ways of being, with ideas, beliefs, philosophies ...In your description of the two processes, there is talk of the future – always ahead of us – constantly becoming the present. What I know is that it is the process of change, painful as that can be, that brings us to new places in the future. Those are often better places than we would have been without the change – particularly if we choose to make it so, to see it so, and not hang on to grievances or dreams or other things that hold us to the past.

The first process tends to assume leaders and followers. Leaders design the future, followers have to grieve. This is William Bridges'³ frame. But, what happens when the leaders are the followers, and the followers are the leaders? Or, what happens when it is only I, and the leaders are some selves (or the Observer), and the followers are others.⁴

I have read this over and over and see it many ways. I'm not sure that I completely understand and I wonder when I am leading and when I am following. I want to understand the interactions of these positions and learn about when to do each comfortably and well. I want to be free to explore them both, which requires an atmosphere of trust – to be able to move between the two positions with confidence and know that those around me, who I live with and work with, understand. But mostly this is about me and becoming comfortable to do this anyway – because I understand and have faith in myself.

The first process can become too structured, less "out of the box", and less gentle and more hurtful. The second process can become too risky, almost psychotic, akin to jumping off a cliff with no parachute. And here, nothing can happen. Harrison Owen⁵ talks of this when he says that some people, in the grieving process, get stuck sitting in the great Void, never able to move beyond this. And, people who write about shamanic work describe the person who receives the initiatory call, but cannot say either "no" or "yes"⁶. This person remains wounded, like the Fisher King in the grail story, always wounded, always living and re-living the dark night of their soul⁷.

I feel so determined not to do this, get stuck – certainly at other times of change in my life, I have sometimes hung on too long to the situation, or the past. But, I would like not to do that, particularly in this case of this organization. I just can't quite see the way through – just the next step and often not even that. I think that already I have been stuck because I didn't see or perhaps I refused to see or I questioned myself too much, and still do. It has helped to have you, and others, give clarity. But even when I am in the middle of examining the situation, the history, the present, my actions, how I feel, the possible ramifications of potential steps and on and on, I feel somewhat detached. This is what it is – the people are who and how they are – we are here together to learn things from

³ William Bridges, The Way Of Transitions: Embracing Life's Most Difficult Moments, Perseus Publishing, 2002 contains both his original thinking, and his total re-thinking flowing from the death of his wife from cancer.

⁴ In my own grieving process, I have discovered the importance of allowing each self the space to find its own way, tell its own story. There has been a dying of the sense of a "core self", and a blossoming of all of the different selves.

⁵ Harrison Owen, The Power Of Spirit: How Organizations Transform, Berrett-Koehler, 2000

⁶ Tom Cowan, Fire In The Head: Shamanism And The Celtic Spirit, Harper Collins, 1993

⁷ Gerald May, The Dark Night Of The Soul, Harper Collins, 2004

each other, the situation. I'm grateful for them all. I wonder how we will get through this ... I want to know how I feel along the way and be clear about that.

What we know, I think, is that true creativity lies in between, living in the open spaces between the old stories⁸, and yet the in between is frightening to stand in, walk in, and be in.

I have been deeply shaped by the last five years, by Cait's death. For me, now, there is "no going back", there is nothing I can do to bring back what was, Eden, home, known, trusted. Out of this, I "see" organizations in change, and know that they cannot go back to what was, even when some people either do not see the changes, or cry and cry for the past. For me personally, it has been the second, more irrational and informal process, of grieving and more grieving, of letting go and more letting go, with absolutely no sense of the future, though I am slowly, now, reaching that point, of defining some kind of future.

It always comes, doesn't it (the future) – as long as we live (and when we don't, I think it comes too, but in a different way). It can take a long time to get a sense of it when we have been deeply hurt, as you have, but that sense comes eventually because the future is there and has purpose, shaped by the hurt that has created it.

If anything, I have survived by being able to stay focused on the present only, knowing the past has gone, and the future does not yet exist. There are those who try for this most of their lives and never find a way to really practice it. As I commented earlier, at times, this has felt like jumping off a cliff with no parachute, no past, and no future

Rumi says:

*The way of love is not a subtle argument
The door there is devastation
Birds make great sky circles of their freedom
How do they do it?
They fall, and falling are given wings.*

Yet, I also know that organizations cannot live like this, though I have tried to write about this by saying that non profit organizations need to see themselves in their non-essentiality⁹. It is really quite a relief to think of organizations in that sense. Organizations cannot withstand this high degree of "nothingness" and "unknowingness". No, they can't for so many reasons ... but sometimes some of us within them need to

⁸ Jeanette Winterson, Light Housekeeping, Knopf Canada, 2004

⁹ See Section III.

understand that there may be periods of time when knowing is not possible – we have to find a way to be with that.

Hi Gavin,

Reading what you have written, I can't help thinking once again how we are travelling on parallel paths. For the last little while I've been doing nothing but getting the talks ready for Ireland. I think things will go well once I get there but right now I'm full of insecurities. One problem is the great contrasts between our environments. Without sounding disingenuous, I find it hard to understanding why people in downtown Dublin would want to invite some one from the Arctic to share some insights on community development. The other problem is that I'm using this occasion to consolidate my thinking on community development, and organizations and communities. But I'm not really sure that my thinking has been consolidated in my own mind - and there is the concern that the approach I'm adopting - with a strong emphasis on cosmology -- will be too "woo-woo" and right off their conceptual radar system.

As I was reading what you had written after your dream I obviously thought of what I had been writing. And I thought about the quotation from Thomas Berry: “We are in trouble just now because we do not have a good story. We are between stories.” I feel very much between stories, wondering if I will have enough time in my life to come to some kind of synthesis. You also seem to be between stories - can't go back and can't seem to go forward. I also sense that you are trying very hard to work out a synthesis in your own thinking.

One of the things I find myself reflecting on is how “my story” relates to “the story” - the story about what is happening in the world around us especially as it affects communities and organizations. I'm sure that the physicists would tell me that “my story” is “the story”. But somehow I get the sense that "the story" is supposed to be much bigger than “my story”. And, there are some aspects to my story that I don't particularly like and don't want to be in “the story”. I'm getting a very strong sense these days - perhaps from reading too much about physics - that my spiritual, internal world is intimately linked to the outer world. That they are one world. That I'm “bringing forth the world” to quote Maturana¹⁰. That there are no “free universals” wandering around somewhere in the ether that are not linked to me and what I'm thinking about and doing. This idea was captured for me recently by a quotation I read in the Globe and Mail one morning: “If we change the way we think about things ... we change the things we think about.” I guess that is what a synthesis is all about. I've also been reflecting on Berry's words “that we are in trouble” because we are in between stories. That sounds like a nice way of saying that we are doing some serious grieving.

¹⁰ Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, The Tree Of Knowledge: The Biological Roots Of Human Understanding, Shambhala, 1987

I - Welcome

Good morning, and welcome. We are entering this day together, a space of dialogue, somewhat different from the other days here together at the Institute. This is an experiment, a risk we are each taking, in choosing to be personally present, to turn up here.

In the summer of 2001, my son, Ben, wrote to me from Nigeria, reflecting on the importance of voice and story, mine and his. He said:

We come and go, in and out of people's lives. Paths cross and stories are exchanged. And, it is the road that we each have traveled, some times alone, that provides definition for others. There is danger in always walking the same path. And, there is much need for people to walk together.

Today, and this week, we are here together. For the next hour or so, I have been offered a unique time and space to give voice to what I have seen and experienced, learned and thought, over 30 plus years of “walking about” in the non profit sector; and five years now of walking along the spiraling and bumpy journey with Caitlin’s, my daughter, Ben’s sister, death - in this city. I have walked these roads with others. More and more, I walk these roads alone. More and more, I am walking down roads where there seem to be no signposts. May our conversations together this day be spacious, rich, and blossoming. May we share the signs we see and experience.

I welcome all of us into this open space. And in doing so, I want to remind us of the principles and laws of Open Space¹¹: (1) "It will begin when it is ready to begin", (2) "It will end when it is over", (3) "Whoever comes are the right people", (4) "Whatever happens is what was meant to happen", and (5) "We each have two feet, a responsibility to take care of our own participating and learning".

My reflections this morning have many headwaters, but their roots lie in an essay written during the hot days of August in 1999 in Montreal, sitting at Caitlin's kitchen table. The first title of that essay was "One More Nail In The Coffin". Later, with more hope, or perhaps more fear of not being read at all, I shifted it to "The Voluntary Sector At A Crossroads".

That Fall, I asked Cait to write a piece to begin a client newsletter on "unruliness". I start here with her words, for three reasons. First, because in choosing to be here this morning,

¹¹ Harrison Owen, Riding The Tiger: Doing Business In A Transforming World, Abbott Publishing, 1991

I come to celebrate her life and her death. That is always a part of my coming to Montreal. Second, because "risk" and "passion" are key threads in what I want to say. And third, because the metaphor of a tightrope, where there may no longer be platforms at either end, might well stand us in good stead as we try to understand where the non profit sector is, or might be, heading. Cait was and is a tightrope dancer.

Cait wrote:

I am perfectly still except for my hands which, almost of their own accord, search the air above my head for balance. My body is calm, but my mind races. As much as I try and control it, there is a fear that sends sparks through my body, shaking my knees and ankles. I am fighting. It is a simple jump, I know what to do: push, stretch, tuck your knees up, shoot them back out, land, and absorb the shock. I have taken this jump a hundred times with confidence, but today I am terrified. I have a choice. I push the rampant images of a missed footing out of my head, and the fear transforms, becoming a concentrated stream of energy that electrifies my body from head to toe. I jump!

This is a story about risk. Or maybe it is a story about passion. In some ways they go hand in hand. By chosen (and the word is important) profession, I am a tightrope walker. I quite literally "walk the fine line". There is one simple rule in tightrope walking: Don't Fall Off! However, the daily challenge that lies underneath this rule is more complex, and perhaps more important.

The challenge is not simply to cross from one platform to the other, but to do so with grace and elegance - to move as if dancing on water. Easier said than done. Before stepping out onto the wire, there is fear, the eternal "What if?". Once safe on the other platform, there is elation and triumph. In the middle, runs the cable of risk, a place of freedom which can only be found in the middle of two extremes. In this place, the order of risk overtakes any other. Falling is simply not an option. As an acrobat, I must always outdo myself - jump higher, dance faster. In this space, risk is beautiful. It is the rule of "Anything is possible!"

This is my everyday story of risk. This is also my story of passion. Or, maybe this is a story of my passion for risk. My place is on a cable between two platforms. It is a fragile place.

Cait's words evoke. Cait's actions, in Lance Evoy's words, call us to "steel ourselves, in this moment, and then enter the fray again and again".

II - My Background, My Stories

Before going much deeper, let me give you some sense of who I am. How did I get here today?

The Straightforward Story

First, the straightforward story. I have been working in the non profit sector for 30 plus years, as: community developer, funder, researcher, social planner, senior manager, Board member, consultant, teacher, writer, and mentor. I have engaged with volunteers and staff in non profits in the arts, cultural industries, social services, child care, legal services, literacy, health services, housing, and community economic development, helping them develop Boards that matter, build visions and strategic plans, create effective designs and architectures, implement change, and resolve knotty problems. Out of this experience, I have written, and taught.

But, even this story is not as straightforward as it might seem. I started with an earlier story, a passion for mathematics. As that journey came to an end, having no more heart, I ended up at a party, a serendipitous experience, and “fell” into community development.

Over these 30 plus years, and certainly more and more recently, I have been particularly fascinated by the unique issues faced by non profit organizations that are essentially embedded parts of public service systems, organizations whose primary work comes through government contracting. Much of my thinking and writing¹² about non profit organizations has been shaped by these interests and questions. What does it mean for a non profit organization to be embedded in public service systems? How do these organizations think systemically in systemic contexts over which they have little influence? What does this mean for their Boards?

The Not So Straight Forward Story

Second, the not so straightforward journey. Five years ago, I was confronted with Caitlin's death, here in this city, early one morning, a Friday. I have walked through darkness, lightness, madness, despair, and hope. This journey is not over. It is never over.

¹² For example, Gavin Perryman, [A Meditation On Boards](#), May, 2003; _____, [Creating Non Profit Boards That Matter: Is There A Way Of Thinking Differently?](#), September, 2004; _____, [Non Profit Organizations And Public Systems: Differences That Make A Difference](#), November, 2004. All of my writings regarding organizational development within the non profit sector can be found at www3.telus.net/gavinperryman.

My experience with organizations has given me metaphors for this journey, a journey that has no real signposts, no known roadmaps. It is a journey of going deeper and deeper, of letting go, and of gradually re-claiming what died. This journey has radically shifted how I think, feel, and act as a person, a man, a father, a friend, a lover, and as a consultant and writer in the non profit sector. My roots were torn out. Slowly, now, a new Spring emerges.

This journey of grieving is a journey first of dying, and second of re-claiming what was, but in radically different ways - dying to all of what was, to the past, to all frames of thinking that had or gave meaning. In the long haul of re-claiming, or being given the gift of reclamation, I had to start with fathering, re-claiming that confidence in “walking beside”, Ben Here, and Cait There. The more immediate task now is re-claiming beauty, and through beauty, aliveness; reclaiming gentleness, and through gentleness, healing; and re-claiming trust, and through trust, confidence.

This is perhaps why I am here, to talk with you about the work of Christopher Alexander, an architect, and to ask: “What is an alive non profit organization?” I ask this question now out of a deeper and more radical sense, radical as in “going to the roots”, that all is impermanent, and all is inter-connected.

Coming Here

Early in 2002, Lance Evoy called me, a contact made through Brian Murphy and Inter Pares: “Would I come and teach a one day workshop on Boards?” With considerable trepidation, not knowing whether I could return to Montreal, be again in this city that I visited joyously many times in the past, I said: “Yes.” I came, and out of that has come a new set of relationships, new blessings. I was here last summer, co-facilitating an experimental four day workshop on the “poetry of organizations and the art of social justice”. And, now I am here again, for which I am deeply thankful.

The Stories In Between The Stories

The challenge I have found over the past few years is to find new life in the “empty spaces between the old stories”, the old stories of Gavin. Here, in between, lie curiosity, gentleness, peace, and creativity.

And this is the challenge I want to raise with all of us this morning. We have old stories that we tell about non profit organizations, about the non profit sector. Old, as in belonging to the past, still important, still shaping how we act, but needing to be radically, again as in “going to the roots”, re-thought and re-lived.

We need new stories that make more sense, that are more useful as metaphors to live by, in the complex, often perverse, always changing environments in which we live, work, and play. I believe we will find these new stories in the in between, in the open and empty spaces¹³ between the old stories.

¹³ Across the universe, matter, or what we call everyday matter, represents only a small percentage of the total. In the spaces in between ordinary matter, there is dark matter and dark energy. We know little about what these mean. But, they suggest a metaphor for the “in between-ness” that I am talking about here. The old stories parallel the ordinary or everyday matter, though even this, at quantum levels, is or can be very strange. The new stories emerge out of the dark matter and dark energy. John Tarrant has written about this in the [Light Inside The Dark](#).

III - Four Threads

There are four threads that I want to inter-weave, and come back to in our dialogue together today: (1) "unruliness", (2) "in-between-ness", (3) "non-essentiality", and (4) "erotic passion". They are, I believe, key to understanding and acting in community, and to designing, and slowly and gently fashioning, non profit organizations that are truly alive, that blaze with spirit.

They also, from my experience, shape the paradox of confronting death, the meaning of death, while living well with courage, daring, and integrity, both alone and in community.

"Unruliness"

In 1999, David Walker wrote in the Manchester Guardian:

Britain's voluntary sector has become severely dependent on state funding, which could cramp its style ... maybe by its nature, the voluntary sector is turned inwards, untidy, and unfocused. The risk in governments taking too lively an interest isn't the seductions of public money, but the risk of applying political and administrative discipline to diffuse and diverse volunteers who have to be unruly and un-ruled.

According to the dictionary, unruliness equals: disposed to resist rule or discipline, intractable, ungovernable, restive. Restive equals: impatient of control, restless, fidgety, stubborn. Intractable equals obstinate, perverse, rebellious.

At one level, unruliness is an inevitable characteristic of any organization, private, public, or non profit, that lives in a changing and complex environment, what Peter Vaill¹⁴ has called: "navigating in permanent white waters". Here, "unruliness" is about the demand to be innovative, adaptive, changing, if we are to survive. Ralph Stacey¹⁵ has called this: "Living with the bounded instability of non-linear, second and third order systems".

¹⁴ Peter Vaill, Managing As A Performing Art, Jossey-Bass, 1989; ____, Learning As A Way Of Being, Jossey-Bass, 1996.

¹⁵ Ralph Stacey, Managing The Unknowable, Jossey-Bass, 1992; ____, Complexity And Creativity In Organizations, Berrett-Koehler, 1996.

At a deeper level, I want to suggest to you that "unruliness" may well need to be one of those key characteristics of non profit organizations, those essences of our organizational souls, that set us apart from private businesses and public agencies. "Unruliness" is a way of being. In other words, we exist as non profit organizations to be "unruly", as in obstinate, perverse, restless, rebellious. This is our gift to local communities, and the broader society: to be more, and do less.

"In-between-ness"

Ralph Stacey has pointed out that true creativity lies in between: in between the formal and the informal, in between the bounded and often hierarchical structures of our organizations and the often, too chaotic, informal cultures of our work relationships; or in between our ego-dominated personality structures and the anarchic realms of our dreams and our subconscious¹⁶. "In-between-ness" is a metaphor, then, for focusing on creativity, change, and thinking radically differently.

In communities, there are numerous complex service systems focusing on needs and problems of particular populations. Non profit organizations are often involved in delivering parts of these service systems. But, there are also many looser, informal community associations that live and operate outside the formal service systems. One of the "in between" roles of non profit organizations is to provide a bridge between the formal and informal services, and between people who are isolated and the service systems.

"In between-ness" is also part of the traditional economic view of non profit organizations. Non profit organizations are seen to emerge to fill in the gaps that are not provided, and will not be provided, by either the public or private sectors. These are issues or groups of people who are too small or too specialized to receive collective attention from the public sector; or, they are issues or groups of people where there is no "paying market".

"In-between-ness" points to the bridge between life and death, to the ecstatic and unruly journeys of the shaman, and to the open spaces between the old stories. One of the "in between" roles of non profit organizations is to provide a bridge between the traditional frames of thinking that exist, and that underlie much of the work of governments and public agencies, and the new stories that are emerging or need to emerge. Advocacy is

¹⁶ Some dream analysts have suggested that the spaces in between being awake and dreaming, and dreaming and awakening, are the most evocative, the richest spaces to explore and find clarity. See, for example, Namkhai Norbu in [Dream Yoga and The Practice Of Nature Light](#) and Arnold Mindell in [Dreambody](#). Since dreaming is so important to us as alive persons, curious and open, I wonder what dreaming means in organizations.

not simply a question of advocating for, but also one of helping people see what is wrong with the old stories and what might be possible as a new story. This is “in between-ness”.

Not that long ago, I re-met a man who I had not seen for 25 years. Like me, he had lost a child, an adult son to leukemia. As we talked, it became clear that his core response to this experience has been one of contemplation, while his ex-wife has been caught at the other pole, in chaos. What struck me was that, five years after Cait’s death, I continue to live in-between, moving, often daily, from one pole to the other, from contemplation to chaos.

"Non-essentiality"

The question is: "Our are non profit organizations, and the work we do, nice, important, or essential?" This relates to two larger questions: (1) "Is the non profit sector nice, important, or essential¹⁷?" and (2) "What are the real differences, the ‘differences that make a difference’¹⁸, between non profit organizations, and private businesses or public agencies?"

The traditional answer we have given to these questions is that non profit organizations: (1) know more about local community realities, (2) care more about people (staff, volunteers, clients, Board members), (3) are more passionate about their work, their clients and missions, (4) can engage volunteers and donors, (5) can provide higher quality services more cheaply, and (6) are more flexible and innovative. Here, “more” is relative to both public agencies and private businesses¹⁹. My experience is that these stories are generally no longer valid. Our "essential-ness" does not, cannot, lie here.

Non profit organizations, while often delivering important services, important to members, clients, and communities, are not usually essential²⁰. Clients, communities,

¹⁷ I understand the word “essential” here as being different from “essence”, the core or heart of what we are about as persons or non profit organizations. “Essence” does not imply “essentiality”.

¹⁸ This is a phrase coined by Gregory Bateson.

¹⁹ What is worth noting in the practice and literature of non profit organizations is that are becoming more “public” (for example: increased attention on accountability and outcomes) and more “private” (for example: increased attention to business-like human resource practices and to social enterprises). The lines between the three sectors are blurring.

²⁰ It is worth noting that the private sector has a language to talk about the death of their organizations, words like "bankruptcy" and “mergers” and “leveraged buy outs”. We in the non profit sector have no such words, or at least stay away from using them. This makes it much more difficult for us to engage with questions like: "Is it time for our organization to close, to die?" or “Has our erotic passion gone?” It also makes it more difficult for us to partner, to take risks, and to live well through crisis, for we are always, or often, trying to hang on to life, to our sustainability.

members, volunteers, donors, funders, and contractors can go elsewhere. Public agencies (for example: hospitals) cannot say this so easily. Private businesses can, there is always more than one hardware store.

There is a certain freedom to be found in not being essential, not having to survive at all costs, though this freedom is not easy to embrace in the face of, for example, staff concerns and uncertainties about their identities, jobs, and salaries. Within this freedom, there are true possibilities for being unruly, playful, and innovative - to seek the abundance of gay abandonment²¹. Embracing such non-essentiality is about taking wise risks, but risks none the less. It is about "going for broke", developing a blazing vision, going after it, even if this means the organization dies in the process.

My read is that this could be a Buddhist path to managing and imagining our non profit organizations: staying focused in the present; and acknowledging that the past has gone, the future does not yet exist, illness, suffering, and death are inevitable, and permanence is an illusion²².

Our essential-ness, then, may well lie in claiming our non-essential-ness.

"Erotic passion"

Non profit organizations are born out of passion and defiance, often firey and unruly, out of a collective concern for, and advocacy about, some burning issue or another.

Public agencies do not have such missions²³. They have statutes and slogans. Private businesses do not have such missions, they have the concerns of shareholders, and the interests of customers, managers, and employees. They also may have slogans.

²¹ As an example, consider the severe difficulties that non profit organizations have in investing their financial reserves in research, development, or new work. The tendency is always to "hoard" for a rainy day, which marks a frame of scarcity, not a frame of abundance. Yet also consider what can be accomplished if "hoarding" gives way to "investing", and scarcity gives way to abundance.

²² At some point, this thought might become a lengthy essay.

²³ I am not talking, here, about the, typically slogan-like, mission statements that arise out of strategic planning processes, but about the deep core, or history, of what this organization is all about, or what its people deeply care about.

There is a creative and unruly, almost erotic energy to be found in focusing serious attention on our missions, on our “community or associational lives”²⁴ as non profit organizations. There is also a risk, for in pursuing erotic energies, like the unfolding serpentine Kundalini experience, we may burn up²⁵.

However, here we are different from private businesses, public agencies, crown corporations, and “quango’s” or quasi-not-profit-organizations. Our essential-ness lies in mission and community, not in services and products.

At a personal level, “erotic passion” is about our learning to deeply love others, the world (inanimate and animate) around us, and ourselves; and, about our commitment to the spiraling journey. This life long journey of learning, suffering, discovering joy and beauty, always moving-forward-toward our inevitable death and dying, is our mission, our essence. Through it, we discover, if we are lucky, periods of “great work” that have passion, mission, and focus. For me, this has been pursuing mathematics, fathering, and caring for the community or voluntary sector.

In confronting the fact and the “ripples” of Cait’s death, I faced a choice: denial and return to the past, to whom I was; leave this world entirely, either physically or emotionally or spiritually; or strip naked and go deeper and deeper, no matter the cost²⁶. I have chosen the latter, the third choice. I believe that this is the choice of “aliveness”. If non profit organizations are to be truly “alive”, then they, too, need to make this choice.

²⁴ See Section V.

²⁵ It is worth noting here the distinction between feelings and emotions that open doors and windows such as rage, anger, and desire; and, those that close us down such as hate, bitterness, and fear. Within non profit organizations, the former lead to action, advocacy, and the “community or associational” life; while the latter, often too common, lead to a retreat inwards, and into safety and non risk. There is a parallel here with encountering death. The former emotions lead to Spring, and new life. The latter emotions lead to Winter, and decay.

²⁶ This is, I sense, the meaning behind Brian Murphy’s words: “Embrace the pain as you would a lover.”

IV - Four Questions

The four threads are, in some sense, my metaphorical answers to four questions: (1) "What is an organization?", (2) "What is a non profit or voluntary organization?", (3) "What is a healthy (or efficient, effective, sustainable) non profit organization?", and (4) "What is a non profit organization that is truly alive?"

Don't leave yet! I am not intending to deliver an academic lecture on organizational theory, though I have learned much from the organizational research and literature that has been fundamental to my consulting, writing, living with, and walking beside, Cait's death.

Nor am I going to provide you with "a coherent and consistent theory of everything". As a mathematician in a previous life, I know that this is meta-logically impossible²⁷.

But, I do want to suggest to all of us that we need to ponder deeply on these questions. The answers to them are not obvious. We all walk into our conversations here at the Institute, and elsewhere, with diverse, implicit, and hidden assumptions about what these words mean: "organization", "non profit", "healthy", and "alive". Without uncovering these assumptions, laying them bare together, I doubt that we will discover new imaginations, new stories in between the old stories.

Each of these questions leads to other questions.

*What Is An Organization?*²⁸

The first question, "What is an organization?" leads to, for example: "What responsibilities adhere to an organization and its peoples because the state has freely given it the right to incorporate?", or to: "What metaphors - machine, clock, brain, computer, river, organism, school, prison, culture, community - help us understand organizations, or this particular organization?"²⁹

²⁷ This is the essence of Goedel's work.

²⁸ It is important to keep reminding ourselves that organizations are but tools for what we as a people want to accomplish.

²⁹ Gareth Morgan, Images Of Organization, Sage Publication, 1986.

I take as a basic set of assumptions that organizations are: (1) complex, (2) open (that is, dependent on their environments for the resources they need to survive), (3) dynamic (that is, always changing) systems, (4) of second order (that is, non linear) where the linkages between cause and effect are not obvious, and therefore (5) living always with bounded instabilities (that is, lying between static equilibrium and pure chaos), and (6) operating in complex and changing ecological environments, sometimes alone and sometimes in partnership with others, and that, as such, (7) organizations are alive, have spirit, and are much greater than the sum of their parts³⁰.

What Is A Non Profit Organization?

The second question, "What is a non profit organization?", while having a simple technical answer - privately owned, but no share dividends - leads to, for example: "What are the essential differences between a non profit organization and a private business or a public agency?" and "In this era, are there any essential differences?"; or to "What are the key factors or characteristics that shape a non profit organization?" such as size, wealth, and revenue patterns, and "What do we mean when we say (too glibly, I think) that non profit organizations should be publicly accountable?"

What Is A Healthy Non Profit Organization?

The third question, "What is a healthy non profit organization?" leads into the traditional thinking about the non profit sector, for example: "What is the role of the Board?", "Is it all about leadership?", "Are our people happy?", "Is there work meaningful to them?", or "Where is your mission and strategic plan?". These are a consultant's stock in trade. What I get paid to worry about. But, more importantly in the context of these reflections, it also leads to questions about risk, unruliness, effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability.

What Is A Non Profit Organization That Is Truly Alive?

The fourth question, "What is a non profit organization that is truly alive?", is the key for me, at least for today. I have come to this fourth question, in the light-ness and the dark-ness, in the spacious-ness and the closed-ness, of walking with Cait's life and death; but also only after many years of struggling with the other questions. As I confront Cait's death, the crisis of Cait's death, there is a huge hole. I have no frame large enough to offer any understanding, any sense of home or belonging, for this experience. And so I go deeper, look to see deeper, searching for a much bigger picture of aliveness and beauty.

³⁰ The implications of seeing organizations as alive is that they are always seeking diversity, interiority, and communion. See Section VII.

Those of us who walk with the tragic loss of a beloved, of a son or daughter, face a “gulf”. We are strangers in our own land. It is the gulf between what I know, and what most of you cannot know – and should not have to know. This gulf leads to a “code of silence”. It is as if our voices are broken, and any attempt to give voice to what we experience cannot describe the reality, the Is-ness of it, of what each day is like. It is also, and this is more important, as if any attempt to give voice somehow dis-honours what happened, for there seem to be no words, no frames, big enough to capture Then.

And yet, I am here today to give voice. Why? Because in the act of voicing, of dialoguing together, new words, new stories, and new frames emerge.

I want to suggest that this is where things are at with the non profit sector. The traditional stories or frames are dying. Without breaking the “code of silence”, we will not, alone or together, create space for the manifestation of new stories.

V - Three Lives

As I leave these four questions for you to ponder on, I want to suggest that it helps to think of non profit organizations as having three separate, but inter-woven, lives: (1) "associational or community", (2) "product or service", and (3) "innovation or renewal".

Associational Life

The "associational or community life" is where people come together freely, in dialogue, to explore what the mission of the organization means to them as persons and families, living in neighbourhoods and working in diverse settings. The "associational or community life" is about learning, risking personal change, and, potentially, neighbourhood and social action.

Product Life

The "product or service life" is where attention is focused on doing things for the broader community, or groups of people within the community, or members. The "product or service life" is about growth, outcomes, client or customer relationships, funding, standards, staff, and volunteers.

Innovation Life

The "innovation or renewal life" is where new thoughts, ideas, languages, and metaphors come into play, perhaps gestated or sparked by actions, crises, and conflicts within the two other lives; and, are given birth, defined, and brought to fruition. The "innovation or renewal life" encompasses planning in traditional forms, but also entrepreneurial thinking.

In personal language, we might think of the "associational or community life" as having to do with the Spirit and Soul of the organization, the "product or service life" as having to do with the Body and Heart of the organization, and the "innovation or renewal life" as having to do with the Mind of the organization. Whatever the words, I am convinced that each non profit organization, if it is to survive, thrive, be sustainable, make a long term discernible difference in its community, and be alive, needs to pay attention to the creative dynamics of all three separate lives.

My experience with many non profit organizations is that they are dominated, driven, and shaped largely by their "product or service life". While early on in their histories, the other lives, "community or associational" and "innovation or renewal", played a part in people's initial passions and hopes, in time, these became buried in the hubris and detritus of the everyday realities of funding, staffing, managing, leading, planning, and being accountable.

VI - The Traditional Story

This section is an all too short summary of a series of essays, written from 1999 to 2005, reflecting on the state of the non profit community services sector. It makes sense here as a more analytical interlude between the previous sections, laying the groundwork, and the next sections on non traditional stories. The comments, here, are terse, and should be read with a “grain of salt”, as a mirror for looking at the traditional stories within your own organization(s).

Let me say a bit more about the traditional stories we have told ourselves about ourselves in the non profit sector, our collective history, though I want to be cautious, for the non profit sector is incredibly diverse³¹. And, every non profit organization is, and should be, fiercely unique, living out the dynamics of the particular phase of its own life cycle.

Language And Stories

It is important to unpack some of the language we have used, and still use, to describe the voluntary sector, to answer the questions: “What is a non profit organization?” and “How are we different from public agencies and private businesses?”. The language embeds our beliefs and values. The language constructs the metaphors, models, and mindsets, that I believe we need to question, and maybe jettison.

Many of our voluntary organizations have their roots in the work of citizens and volunteers: giving birth to new associations and organizations, initiating new programs and activities, delivering services, carrying out management functions, advocating, ... The organization started out with a small volunteer-delivered service: a volunteer bureau or a lay counselling program, perhaps. Over time, it grew, often by taking on more and more government contracts. Or, the organization started out advocating around a specific issue: racism, or child care, or international community development.

Voluntarism was about citizenship, caring for communities, giving back and donating time, money, and spirit. It was about making choices freely, building community, and being passionate.

Volunteers and voluntarism are still very much alive and well, though perhaps altered by different motivations such as learning and gaining work experience. In this sense, altruism, civic spirit, and community building remain part of the fabric of local

³¹ This diversity is so immense that I have argued, often, that there is no such thing as the non profit sector. The diversity includes focus of attention, geography, size, revenue patterns,

communities. There are some voluntary organizations that remain deeply rooted in the work of volunteers. And, there are others that have one or two major programs that rely primarily on volunteers.

However, for larger chunks of the voluntary sector, and particularly the community services sub-sector, volunteers and voluntarism no longer play a defining role. Their presence is residual, a shadow of the past. Staff deliver services, carry out management roles, and maintain the primary relations with clients, other agencies, and funders. Boards have much more limited influence. Their roles as active citizens have waned, replaced with greater concerns such as “fiduciary responsibility”.

Further, many public agencies (for example: schools and recreation centres), quasi-public (for example: hospitals), and private sector organizations (for example: airports and ski hills) rely to some extent on volunteers. This reinforces the point that voluntarism is no longer a defining characteristic for the voluntary sector. It is an aspect of the on-going life of many organizations. We ought to see this as an exciting potential.

Voluntarism has also been about donating. Again, this remains strong in Canada, particularly in churches. But, there have been major shifts: (1) there are many voluntary organizations that have essentially no community financial support, (2) fund raising has become largely professionalized³², and (3) fund raising has become increasingly dominated by larger organizations, and by the activities of public and quasi-public agencies.

Finally, voluntarism has been about choice, passion, and advocacy. New associations were born as a way to give some organizational structure to peoples’ passions: for tackling community issues, providing choices to people in need, and advocating for change. For many voluntary organizations, particularly in the community services sub-sector, choice is no longer a defining issue. Whom they serve, and how, is determined by the funders. Someone else is the gatekeeper for service entry, determines the service standards, sets staffing policies and compensation rates,

Advocacy has weakened. It has shifted from Boards and volunteers taking public or political action, to Executive Directors managing their relations with funders and larger public service systems. New structures have emerged to “advocate” at provincial and federal levels, but largely they consist of staff and managers. They focus primarily on service and staffing issues, not on the questions of the future of the voluntary sector, or the unique needs of local communities, or the rights of clients. In other words, coalitions, consortiums, and partnerships, working within the system, have taken the place of advocacy.

³² Witness, for example, how mail campaigns are now run, or the high salaries paid to fundraising staff.

At the same time, there has been considerable talk about the importance of prevention, though limited action in terms of allocating funds. However, prevention has been somewhat “neutered” by insisting that it be seen as part of an “integrated, seamless continuum of services.” As a result, prevention becomes individually focused, not shaped by considerations of community assets, root causes, or advocacy.

Finally, for many voluntary organizations, passion has become more an attribute of staff, carrying out their professional duties, well and innovatively, within larger and maturing service systems. For volunteers, Boards, and members, passion has often waned. This is a strong statement, but it reflects much of my experience as a consultant with many diverse voluntary organizations. Underneath, people are looking for a renewed Spirit for their voluntary organizations. However, I suspect that they will not find this within the voluntary sector as it has emerged.

We have used the words voluntary sector, non-profit or not-for-profit sector, charitable sector, third sector, social enterprises ... to capture our beliefs that non profit and voluntary organizations are, and should be, separate and distinct from public agencies and private businesses. At the core, this has been about affirming the independence and importance of non profit and voluntary organizations, and clarifying the boundaries separating the three sectors.

The defining words have been largely negative: not profit driven, not large, not bureaucratic, not rule bound, not rich, not selfish, not self-centred, not political, not share dividends ... The boundary lines have been diffuse, allowing for many diverse associations and organizations to co-exist within this wild and woven skein we have called the non profit sector. We have used these defining words to struggle to capture our beliefs that voluntary organizations are, or should be, at their heart: passionate, caring, innovative, different, ...

Much of this has now changed, partly as a result of the changing nature of government contracting. Corporations, small businesses, and private operators have entered, and are doing so more frequently, fields of service traditionally held by non profit and voluntary organizations. New partnerships are being created between voluntary organizations and private businesses. Voluntary organizations are being pressured to become more “business-like,” and are choosing to become more entrepreneurial. The lines between what is voluntary and what is private are blurring.

Perhaps more important is that many voluntary organizations, particularly in the community services sub-sector, have become, or been defined to be, public sector employers. The lines between what is voluntary and what is public are blurring. These voluntary organizations contract with major service systems within the Provincial government, belong to provincial employers’ councils, are in line to be accredited by Provincially chosen accrediting agencies, are unionized and part of sector-wide

bargaining processes, hire staff who are loyal first to their professions, ... Many, perhaps most, provide excellent services.

The boundary lines between what we have considered government and voluntary are not only being blurred, but, more fundamentally have been torn apart. What is emerging is a large number of non profit or voluntary organizations who are, effectively, quasi-crown corporations. Those voluntary organizations which are primarily contracting with government are first accountable to their funders, and second to their clients. Their managers largely report to civil servants. Accountability to the community is long gone. This is not an argument about government conspiracies, or the “controlling character” of governments, provincial or federal. Rather, these changes emerge out of complex and maturing service systems, particularly in times of severe fiscal restraint.

The traditional political perspective of non profit and voluntary organizations has been that they are independent, “owned” by their members, and accountable to their local communities. The independent ownership was balanced by the responsibility to the local community. Much of this has also now changed. Membership has declined, both in size and importance. Accountability has shifted away from Boards and the community, to funders and clients. Regionalization has led to organizations with little or no community roots.

Economically, we have shifted from voluntary organizations emerging to fulfill needs and interests not met by government and the private sector, to seeing, at least a large chunk of, the voluntary sector, as existing to respond to the needs of government for flexible, and sometimes cheaper, ways to deliver services, needed and demanded by local communities. Many call this down-loading, but I believe it is better seen as part of the broader systems-integration processes underway.

Efficiency And Safety

Another question has surfaced: “What does it mean to be an efficient and safe non profit or voluntary organization?”

This has its roots in: (1) contracting with governments, (2) the demands from government contractors for accreditation and consistent standards, (3) public fiscal restraints and the resulting pressures to “do more with less”, (4) public and media cries for “no mistakes”, (5) the rise of policy governance models, and (6) increasing concerns from Board members about their personal liabilities.

As a result, we have strived to become more efficient and safer; and, therefore, less risky, less unruly, and less innovative.

Sustainability and Excellence

Several years ago, several colleagues and I were asked to undertake a research project around non profit organizational sustainability issues, and the strategic interventions that could be considered by funders. The questions were: “What does a sustainable non profit organization look like?” and “How does this relate to excellence?”

We started with a definition:

A not-for-profit organization is excellent if it makes a positive, relevant, and discernible difference in its community, and to its clientele, customers, consumers, or audiences, however these might be defined. A not-for-profit organization is sustainable if it can maintain this excellence over time.

It was then necessary to lay out an initial understanding of what not-for-profit organizational sustainability entails, despite the immense diversity challenges. We made three points.

First, organizations that matter have focus and heart, a clear sense of spirit. They are connected to a broader story (history, mission, and dreams) that fuels people's passions. There is a sense of wholeness as an organization, connectedness among all of the parts, and synergy. There is recognition of the power of leadership, and the need for leaders to be there for the long term. There is a true sense of inclusiveness. And, there are sufficient resources to do the work well (people, time, funds, spaces, technologies, information, ideas, markets, and credibility).

Second, experience suggests that there are a broad set of overlapping organizational components that tend³³ to lead to not-for-profit organizational sustainability and excellence: (1) long term visioning and planning, (2) effective leadership and management, (3) competent and passionate volunteers and staff, (4) clarity about values and beliefs, often expressed in guiding policies, (5) efficient processes and systems (for example: for managing information, reporting, and risks), (6) sufficient resources (funds, people, ideas, markets, and credibility), (7) knowledge of the field of endeavour, markets, partners, and competitors, (8) effective relationships with key "stakeholders" (for example: clients or customers, communities, partners, and funders), and (9) on-going attention to organizational excellence, sustainability, and renewal. How a particular not-for-profit organization will consider and develop each of these components, how the

³³ The use of the word “tend” here indicates that these are common factors, but they are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions.

various factors will interplay, and which will need to be given priority attention, will be unique to that not-for-profit, and will inevitably change over time.

Third, a number of assumptions about the organizational change and renewal processes that lead to sustainability and excellence can be suggested. Organizational change and renewal requires or entails: (1) experienced, passionate, committed, and wise leadership, (2) a long term process, (3) time, energy, creativity, and funds beyond everyday business, (4) understanding of the changing landscape, (5) personal commitments to learning, changing, investing, and risking, (6) strategies for change and renewal that fit the organization's history, mission, culture, leadership style, field of endeavour, and stage in the life cycle, and (7) a mix of assessment or diagnosis; thinking, learning, and planning; and acting and further learning, though not necessarily in that order.

As I reflect back on this work now, our thinking was sound, but only in a very traditional sense. I do not think we were prepared to go far enough, to be daring enough. Interestingly, the funders were not even prepared to go as far as we went.

VII - The Power Of Metaphor And Story

The journey of grieving, of encountering death, is one of re-claiming; and, at the same time, crafting a new story. Re-claiming has been both re-claiming those parts of myself that were torn apart, rent asunder, with Cait's death; and, re-claiming ways of being in the world. Father and fathering. Tribe and trusting and connecting. Gentleness and healing. And, beauty and appreciating and living. In a parallel way, we can re-claim our organizations, and our organizational stories; and, in this process, re-fashion who we are, who we think we are, who we are trying to become.

Think, for a moment, about the different metaphors or stories we use for framing our organizations: bureaucracies or machines or clockworks, adaptive organisms in changing ecologies, information systems or brains or computers, characters or personalities or psychic prisons, schools or learning communities, cultures or tribes, communities or societies or political systems, spider plants or termite colonies, Each of these is a story, presents us with a story of who we are, and are not³⁴.

I have chosen in this presentation to flow with the work of Christopher Alexander, on the aliveness and beauty of physical forms and art, finding here a new story or metaphor for myself and for organizations. Or, perhaps, this work chose me, as dreams choose us. In doing so, I am not rejecting the other stories or metaphors, more following my own path for now, one that fits with my own journeys.

In many places this week at the summer institute, there are conversations on organizations as "healthy organisms". We need to connect our dialogue here today with those other dialogues. One way to do this is to reflect on the three cosmic principles articulated by Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry that, for them, govern all birthing, living, and dying. Neil Douglas Klotz³⁵ catches these principles in the following.

Diversity reflects the way in which the universe tends to create what is new, unique, and complex. No two cells, blades of grass, fingerprints, bodies, or events are ever exactly alike. On a personal level, this wisdom helps us find our purpose in life as well as the work that expresses this purpose rather than deadens our soul. On the deepest spiritual level, these voices deal with hearing our own unique place in the story of the universe.

³⁴ See, for example, Gareth Morgan, Images Of Organization, Sage Publications, 1986; and, ____, Imaginization: New Mindsets For Seeing, Organizing, And Managing, Berrett-Koehler, 1993

³⁵ Neil Douglas-Klotz, Desert Wisdom,

Interiority or inner presence reflects the way in which everything in the universe organizes a self and exhibits a dimension of subjective spontaneity. From the primeval fireball to the early galactic clouds to the planets in their infancy, each revealed an ability to act as a unique self and move toward its own destiny. By this principle, the universe is a collection of subjects, not objects. Nothing is inert or dead. This wisdom helps us learn how and what we sense, feel, imagine, and experience. On the deepest spiritual level, these voices deal with knowing our self.

Communion reflects the way in which every wave and particle in the universe is connected to every other. Every atom, person, and action is related to every other, to a greater or lesser extent. The tendency of atoms to bond, of animals to herd, and of human beings to form communities reflects this principle. On a personal level, this wisdom helps us focus on our relationships with every other being, and with the source and end of Being. On the deepest spiritual level, these voices deal with how we live and how we die.

We will find these three principles expressed in Christopher Alexander's wisdom.

VIII - The Not So Traditional Story

In the summer of 2003, somehow skipping this Institute, I was at the Shambhala Leadership Institute in Halifax, with my colleagues and friends, Mike Bell and John Talbot. We held a small mini conference within a conference. One evening, I happened onto a lecture on the work of the architect, Christopher Alexander³⁶. I bought his first book, a green tome, but then laid it all aside. Later that winter, I came back to his work and reflections, pouring through Book I, writing a series of letters to Ben based on my readings and reflections, then pouring through Book IV, camping alone in the solitude of Shenandoah National Park in Virginia. Later, that became an essay on aliveness in organizations. This was synchronicity at work.

I want to walk through some of the thoughts in that essay with you this morning. I will lean heavily on Christopher Alexander's words. But, let me start with a story.

An Imaginative Story

Imagine yourselves as a white fluffy cloud, floating high up in the sky, looking down on a community. You can see an organization, stretched out across the community, and into neighbouring communities.

What you see first are the dwelling places of people connected to the organization: clients, donors, friends, supporters, staff, volunteers, and Board members. Each home seems to be a point of light; and, all of these points of light somehow define the organization, and its internal community. Patterns begin to emerge. First, energy threads linking the various homes. Not every home is linked to all of the others; yet every home is connected to some others. A sense of non-separateness emerges overall. The threads seem to portray the patterns of relationships within the organizational community, the relationships among all these people: staff and clients, volunteers in teams, staff in teams, Board members, friendships, ...

Second, four larger centres emerge, somewhat along the axes of a Maltese cross. Nothing is identical. The physical shapes and energies of the four larger centres, the lengths of the arms of the cross, the strengths of the energies of the threads, the numbers of connections to each home are all different. A certain roughness appears, as if the organization has grown organically over the years.

³⁶ Christopher Alexander, Book One: The Phenomenon Of Life, The Centre For Environmental Structure, 2002; _____, Book Four: The Luminous Ground, 2004.

Third, the cross has a distinct centre, in an open courtyard in the town. As you look closer, an oval mosaic lies within this centre. The words, “We walk beside people in crisis, we help people make sound choices”, appear in glowing red tiles. It was placed there with the agreement of the mayor and council, a celebration of people who walk through crises, or who walk beside people facing crises. In your peripheral vision, you notice that this same mosaic is echoed in each of the four centres, creating a linked series of still points in the organization.

Each of the four larger centres has a different function. They contrast with each other. One is a transition house for women fleeing violent relationships. Another is a call centre, people phoning in for help, and staff and volunteers phoning out to provide help. Another is a financial, administrative, and learning centre. And the fourth is a counseling and wellness centre. Despite the functional contrasts, there are similarities, repetitions, and echoes. Physically, each centre has a stillness point, held by one of the mosaic ovals. During each day and evening, people gather there informally to talk through the issues they are facing; or simply to sit silently alone or together.

Within each of the four larger centres, staff and volunteers walk beside people in crisis, and help people make sound choices, in and out of all four locations, whether helping a woman and her children in the town find affordable housing, or calling an isolated senior, or providing financial planning to a man who has just lost his job, or leading an exercise support group for young women facing eating disorders. And, each Monday morning, within each of the four stronger centres, staff and volunteers gather to review the week, and what needs to be done together.

While quite different, each of the four larger centres has been carefully designed along similar lines. No program is so large that people feel separated from the program centre, and from their colleagues within the program centre. A level of scale has been found that fits each well. Each program has a clear identity, a boundary. These boundaries both “enclose” and “lead out”, with a sense of lightness.

People feel their programs, their teams, as extensions of their own individual homes. There is a sense of belonging, of being non-separate.

At the same time, programs have been located in the four larger centres that link together, where close synergies can be obtained by people running into each other each day. As you watch, you can see how individual staff and volunteers interact and work together across programs within their own larger centres.

It is a Tuesday morning. As you observe, three other strong centres seem to emerge. One is a group of people focused on how well the organization is meeting the needs and interests of clients. Another is focused on innovation and renewal. And the third is focused on advocacy and community, and ensuring that the mission of the organization remains front and centre in everyone's work. These are different centres, but they seem to have their own strong lives.

Later that afternoon, people are gathering in the courtyard at the centre of the cross. The threads linking to people's homes appear to be rivers of energy flowing inwards to this centre. It is the annual meeting of the organization, always held outside, always held at the centre of the cross.

The crowd swells, becoming increasingly unruly and passionate. It is impossible to tell who is staff, or volunteer, client or Board member, donor or friend. A series of circles forms around the mosaic. There is silence, then people begin to reflect personally on the year, from the centres of their individual lives, the centres of their programs and groups of programs, and the centres of their organizational focus on service, innovation, and community.

As you move higher now, you see a large beautiful mosaic of alive centres emerging, of people, threads, places, programs, functions, and organizational perspectives. There are small, medium, and larger sized centres. Nothing is the same; a great diversity is present. Yet, there are echoes of commonality, of repeating patterns. Overall, there is a sense of aliveness, of a reaching out horizontally across space and vertically in time.

The Big Picture

My sense is that Christopher Alexander's reflections on living forms and structures, natural or person made, can be summarized through the following eight statements.

- (i) Every living form, animate or inanimate, natural or person made, is a whole, a unity, of parts, called centres.
- (ii) Unified wholes are created, recursively (meaning higher levels are built, grounded, on lower levels), through a series of strong living centres, that are alive, are beings or being-like. Their connectedness; their field-like energies which strengthen each other; and their colour, sound, taste, feel, and touch, come together to create wholeness and aliveness.

- (iii) Wholes and living strong centres can be described and recognized through 15 observed properties. I will talk about these later. However, these properties emerge from the condition of living, of being alive. They are not causal. In other words, they are necessary but not sufficient conditions of living-ness.
- (iv) We recognize living strong centres, and the emergent wholeness or unity, through an intuitive, highly personal act; where, the strong living centres beckon to us, engage with us, make us feel joyous, sad, and connected to the broader universe. Until, in the strongest form, we identify with them, become them, their shapes, boundaries, outside spaces, connections, colours, songs, ... In sum, they sing to us, and, at the deepest level of relatedness, we enter into a song with them. There is, then, a deep connection between our recognition of strong, living centres, and our appreciation of their beauty.
- (v) In addition to the normal, everyday matter in the universe (whether Newtonian and therefore mechanical and determined, Einsteinian and therefore relative and uncertain, or Quantum and therefore discontinuous and probabilistic), there is, there exists, another non-physical reality which has been variously called the: Ground, the Void, Mind, the One, I Am, God, Goddess, the Blazing One,
- (vi) Strong centres are alive, living, self-like, being-like, field force-ful, ... because they have opened up a "tunnel" that is real, objective, between themselves and the Ground. They bring life into being by being a window, a window of the Ground. That is, each strong centre is vibrant, fully alive, fully itself, because of this, at least partial, union with the Ground.
- (vii) We can only create, build, fashion living forms, both wholes and centres, through slow and careful work, from the ground up, always paying awakeful attention to our own intuitive and personal experience of self, I, and I-ness. This is a self-reflective proactive process, that involves inevitable trial and error.
- (viii) This work of creating, fashioning, and building living forms, both wholes and centres, is fundamentally the work of the craftsperson, not the blazing artist or saint, and not the rationalist or technocrat³⁷.

These statements are clearly radical, in the sense of trying to go to the deep roots of what we mean by living forms, or forms that express life. They are more than statements about

³⁷ See, for example, Patricia Pitcher, Artists, Craftsmen, And Technocrats: The Dreams, Realities, And Illusions Of Leadership, Stoddart press, 1995

psychological feeling or neurological resonance. Alexander argues that, when we see living-ness, or being-ness, in an inanimate or animate form, what we are seeing, or experiencing, is the radiant light of that other realm.

The Implications For Non Profit Organizations

My question is: “What might these statements mean for organizations?”

Let me assume that both you and I desire to work, learn, play, and dwell in organizations that express life, even have spirit. Over the past decade, there have been a variety of people writing about spirit in organizations. However, much of this writing boils down to three internal organizational issues: (1) people inside the organization, both volunteers and staff, find their work meaningful; (2) relationships among people within the organization are open, healthy, and supportive; and (3) people within the organization can balance their working, playing, relating, and learning lives. Much of this is about what I referred to earlier as organizational health. I am presuming that what we desire is something within organizations that is deeper than these three statements.

The questions are: "What do such organizations look like?", and "How do we fashion them?"

Organizations are clearly systems, collections of parts. We talk of them as having the potential to have synergy, to be greater than the sum of the parts. We also talk about them as open systems, with porous boundaries to their environments.

Statements (i) and (ii), and (v) and (vi), suggest that organizations that express life, are life or spirit filled, will be built upon, or grounded in, individuals, relationships, teams, and departments that also express life. This is the essential recursive nature of Alexander's argument that living forms are based on strong, living centres, and these, in turn, are based on smaller strong living centres. This means that: (1) organizations that express life have people, staff and volunteers, who also freely and abundantly express life, are in fact on “spirit based” journeys, (2) the boundaries and spaces between people, their inter-relatedness and connectedness, are crucial, (3) organizations that express life can only be built from the ground up, freely and willingly, and (4) organizations that want to be full of life and spirit must create an internal environment, or community, that supports individual learning, inquiring, meditating, and spirit-based journeying; as well, as working to ensure that each person's work, or contribution to the whole, has purpose, meaning, and beauty.

There are a number of knots that we will need to unravel if we want to fashion organizations that express life.

First, we have to face the shadows, as individuals, as teams, and as a broader organizational community. Individuals that deny their own shadows, created through their own personal histories, cannot freely and abundantly express life, cannot be being-like. The same applies to teams. It also applies to organizations, where shadows are also created by history. Equally, we have to face the power of ego, the need to control, and the fears, rages, and angers that easily surface from ego-driven persons and organizations. This will mean finding ways to bring body, heart, and mind into play within organizations, in integrated ways.

Second, we have to begin to see the organization as a whole, as having an existence. Following statement (iv), this will be done personally, and emergently. But, many people within organizations see only themselves, their job, or their team or program. The fact that the organization has an overall mission, an overarching set of core values and policies, and a well designed governance and management structure will not create wholeness. In fact, such hierarchical approaches likely get in the way. The wholeness here is about an intuitive (as in personally known) perspective that is also appreciative.

Third, we have to begin to see the organization as integrally connected with its environment, in fact in one-ness with its environment. From a spiritual perspective, this is about overcoming the separation between self and other. Life emerges from wholeness and connectedness. In other words, it is not possible to create an organization that expresses life without embedding it in an environment that also has life. Traditional (that is, rational) approaches to strategic planning will not, then, work. What is likely required is: (1) a capacity for people to walk outside of the organization, and look back, and (2) a playful and curious inquiring, learning, and emergent approach to the future.

Fourth, we have to confront the twin issues of efficiency and effectiveness. The overwhelming focus in most of our organizations is on activity, output, outcome, and "profit". Activity, output, outcome, and "profit" is the foreground of how we picture and imagine our organizations. They need to become the background, for abundant life is about being, not producing, and maybe even not becoming.

Closely related to this, we have to confront the relationship with customers or clients. Traditionally, we see the organization as subject, acting upon the customer or client as object. Organizations that express life will see their customers or clients as pure subjects. What this likely requires is that: (1) we expand the boundaries of our organization, making them much more porous, so that customers and clients are seen as free and active subjects within the organization, expressing abundant life, and (2) we see the output and outcomes, the products and services, also as parts of the organization, and, therefore, as needing to all express life. What I am suggesting here is that we need to apply the criteria of beauty to all of what we create.

Statements (vii) and (viii) go to the heart of the matter of how we might fashion, over time, organizations that express life. They imply that: (1) the process will take considerable time, slow-ness, and patience, (2) taking risks, learning through trial and errors, and encouraging self-reflective practice throughout the organization will be essential, and (3) all people will need to be encouraged to build their own intuitive and highly personal senses and experiences of what expressing abundant and spirit-based life is all about. This suggests, also, a strong reliance on diversity and dialectical approaches, where differences rubbing up against each other and conflict are the true sources of creativity and imagination.

The Characteristics Of Alive Forms

As I stated earlier, Christopher Alexander outlines 15 properties, or characteristics, that he has observed in living forms, inanimate and animate, over his life time practice as an architect, planner, and artist. My words are adapted from his longer descriptions.

- (a) *Levels Of Scale - is the way that a strong centre is made stronger, partly by smaller strong centres contained in it, and partly by the larger strong centres which contain it*

Forms and structures which have abundant life have centres in a beautiful range of sizes, and these sizes exist in a series of well marked levels, with definite jumps in between them. There are big centres, middle-sized centres, small centres, and very small centres ... The range of scales forms a continuum, which ties the whole together ... Centres at one level give form and life to those at the next ... If the jumps in scale are pronounced, deliberate, and somewhat evenly spaced, then the life will be powerful ... But, these jumps can be neither too big, nor too small.

- (b) *Strong Centres - defines the way that a strong centre requires a field, created by other centres, as the primary source of its strength*

There is a difference between the actual presence of centres which, together, create a whole, and the strength of each centre. Forms and structures with abundant life have strong centres. Each strong centre creates a field, which extends beyond itself, connecting and influencing other centres and the whole. Strong centres radiate. Small centres give strength and energy to larger centres ... There is a sense that the whole is organized around the strong centres ... One's eye, ear, touch, smell, taste, and soul keep returning to gaze on the strong centres ...

The concept of a strong centre is essentially recursive. In other words, a strong centre is made up of smaller strong centres ... In forms and structures that have abundant life, at a

variety of levels, there is a series of strong centres; and, often, one principal centre which is the resting place, the middle, the most important place.

- (c) *Boundaries - is the way in which the field effects of a centre is strengthened by the creation of a ring-like centre, made up of smaller centres, which surround and intensify the first. The boundary also unites the centre with the centres beyond it*

Forms and structures that have abundant life, and the strong centres that infuse them, are often, nearly always, formed by strong boundaries. The purpose of the boundary is twofold. First, it focuses attention on the centre, and thus helps to produce the centre. It creates a field which intensifies the centre. Energy flows into the centre. Second, it unites the centre with the world beyond. It leads the centre out, while also keeping it separate and distinct. The boundary must be distinct from the centre, and thick enough to carry out its dual purposes ... There is a paradox: keeping separate and holding in, and linking out ...

The boundary needs to be of the same order of magnitude as the centre. If too small, it cannot hold in or form the centre. There is not enough energy flowing in. If too large, it dwarfs the centre and cannot lead out. It blocks ... Often, the boundary, itself, is formed of centres ... Within the whole, boundaries are recursive. Every part or centre has a boundary. Every boundary also has a boundary.

- (d) *Alternating Repetition - is the way in which centres are strengthened when they repeat, by the insertion of other centres between the repeating centres*

Living centres intensify other living centres by repeating. The rhythms of the repeating centres, slowly, like the beat of a drum, intensify the field effect ... But this is not just a simple repetition ... It is a kind where the rhythm of the centres that repeat is underlined, and intensified, by an alternating rhythm interlocked with the first. Two systems of centres repeat, in parallel ... but with a kind of counterpoint or opposing beat....

The repetitions tend to be inexact ... a subtle variation occurs that is satisfying and life giving ... the elements are never identical.

- (e) *Positive Space - is the way that a given centre must draw its strength, in part, from the strength of other centres immediately adjacent to it in space. Each group of centres forms a living whole, and these wholes form larger wholes with abundant life. In other words, there is no negative space*

In forms and structures that have abundant life... every bit of space flows outwards and is substantial in itself ... No space is left ... no centre exists, which is leftover from an adjacent space or shape. We may see it like the ripening corn, each kernel swelling until it meets the others, each one having its own positive shape caused by its growth as a cell from the inside ... the extent to which each part is positive is fundamental to life and wholeness ... this applies both to a centre and the space around it. Both must be positive.

(f) *Good Shape - is the way that the strength of a centre depends on its actual shape, and the way that this also requires that even the shape, its boundary, and the space around it are made up of strong centres*

Sometimes the beauty of a shape is subtle, complex, ... There is a sense of a good shape ... the elements of any good shape are always good shapes themselves ... The simplest and most elementary good shapes are made from elementary figures: lines, squares, triangles, diamonds ...

The regularity of the simple shapes creates a potential for much more complex systems of cross-relationships, which can never be attained by loose organic kinds of shapes.

And, what seem like complex shapes or centres are often made up of simpler centres which are also abundantly alive ... circles, S-curves, stars, steps, crosses, waves, and spirals.

(g) *Local Symmetries - is the way that the intensity of a given centre is increased by the extent to which other smaller centres which it contains are themselves arranged in local symmetrical groups*

Whenever there is a local symmetry, there tends to be a centre. And, whenever a living centre forms, it is often out of a strong local symmetry ... Yet, perfect symmetry is often dead. Perfection equals insane rigidity.... In any complex whole, there are nearly always asymmetrical forces at work, matters of location, context, and function ... which require that symmetry be broken ...

What is at stake is not the overall symmetry of a grand design, but limited local symmetries in the parts or the centres which lead to an organic, flexible whole that is adaptive. That is, local symmetry reinforces locality ... and this cascades up, and is not forced down by a rigid, perfect, overall design ... What matters is the number of smaller symmetries ... which hold the space together ... The whole can be free, free as a bird, because of the strengths of the localities.

- (h) *Deep Interlock And Ambiguity - is the way in which the intensity of a given centre can be increased when it is attached to nearby strong centres through a third set of strong centres that ambiguously belong to both*

Forms and structures that have abundant life often have some form of interlock, where the centres are hooked into their surroundings. This makes it difficult to disentangle the centre from its surroundings. The centre becomes more deeply unified with the whole, and with other centres near it ...

The hooking effect is sometimes direct. At other times, it is created through spatial ambiguities, an ambiguous zone which belongs both to the centre and the surroundings ... The centre and its surroundings interpenetrate each other ... a fusion ... a bridge which connects the centre and its surroundings in an indissoluble knot.

- (i) *Contrast - is the way that a centre is strengthened by the sharpness of the distinction between its character and the character of the surrounding centres*

Forms and structures that have abundant life often contain surprisingly intense contrasts. Life cannot occur without differentiation. Unity can only be created from distinctness.... Every centre is made from discernible opposites, and intensified when the centre becomes a not-centre ... through opposing clarification. The contrast is pronounced ...

The awareness of silence is created by a hand clap. The difference between opposites gives birth to something new, the spirit of yin and yang Contrast can be colours, shapes, textures, functions ... Contrast is the differentiation of the void which gives birth to matter.

- (j) *Gradients - is the way in which a centre is strengthened by a graded series of different sized centres which then point to the new centre and intensify its field*

Almost anything which has real life has a certain softness. Qualities vary slowly, subtly, gradually ... Gradients occur. One quality changes across space, and becomes another ... Gradients arise in the whole when the whole is in harmony with itself, simply because conditions vary ... Gradients will follow as the natural response to any changing circumstance in space, as centres become adapted correctly to the changes which move across space ...

Buildings and artifacts without gradients are more mechanical. They have less life to them, because there is no slow variation which reveals the inner wholeness ...

Almost always, the strengthened field character of a centre is caused, in part, by the fact that the organization of smaller centres creates gradients which "point to" some new and larger virtual centre.

(k) *Roughness - is the way in which the field of a given centre draws its strength from the irregularities in the sizes, shapes, and arrangements of other nearby centres*

Forms and structures that have abundant life always have a certain ease, a roughness ... The subtle variations are partly responsible for the beauty, harmony, and life ... Perfectly regular designs do not fit contexts that, themselves, are not regular ... This roughness is not merely an accidental feature, a human error or human imperfection, but is essential. It has a deep structural cause ...

In a man-made object, another essential aspect of the property of roughness is its "abandon". Roughness can never be consciously or deliberately created. Then, it is contrived. Roughness must be the product of ego-less-ness, no will, freedom ... Roughness lets the larger whole be relaxed, modified to the unique demands of locality in time and space.

(l) *Echoes - is the way that the strength of a given centre depends on similarities of angle and orientation, and on systems of centres forming characteristic angles, thus forming larger centres, among the centres it contains*

In forms and structures that have abundant life there is a family resemblance or a deep underlying similarity among the centres, parts, or elements, so deep that everything seems related. Yet, one does not quite know why. Echoes depend on this sensed, but not seen, familiarity.

(m) *The Void - is the way that the intensity of every centre depends on the existence of a still place - an empty centre - somewhere in its fold*

In the most profound centres, which have perfect wholeness and abundant life, there is, at the heart, a void, which is like water, infinite in depth, surrounded by and contrasted with the clutter of stuff all around it ... It connects with the infinite void, and also with the centre of oneself ... It is the silence of the heart ... At the centre, there is stillness ...

It is the quiet that draws the centre's energies and life to itself, giving it the core of its strength... The buzz finally diffuses itself, and destroys its own structure. The calm is needed to alleviate the buzz.

- (n) *Simplicity And Inner Calm - is the way that the strength of a centre depends on its simplicity - on the process of reducing the number of different centres which exist in it, while increasing the strength of these centres to make them weigh more*

Wholeness, life, has a way of being simple ... It is a quality which is essential to the completeness of the whole. It has to do with a certain slowness, majesty, quietness ...

Everything un-necessary is removed. All centres that are not actively supporting other centres, and the whole, are stripped out, cut out, excised. What is left is the structure, the whole, in a state of calm. The deep purpose of the beauty, design, and ornamentation is to bring this calm into being, not to destroy it.

- (o) *Not-Separateness - is the way that the life and strength of each centre depends on the extent to which that centre is merged smoothly - sometimes even indistinguishably - with the centres that form its surroundings*

All forms and structures that have abundant life have connectedness. We experience a living thing as a whole, at one with the world - not separate from the world. Every centre is not cut off, isolated, separated - it is connected to what surrounds it in profound ways. Without this, all of the other properties fail...

Those unusual things which have the power to heal, the depth and inner light of real wholeness, are never un-connected. You cannot really tell where one thing breaks off and the next begins, because the thing is smokily drawn into the world around it, and softly draws this world into itself. It connects. It asserts the continuity of space, the continuity of all of us, the wisps of morning fog which hang dreaming over the fields of flowers...

The sophisticated version of this property, which comes about when it is created recursively, produces an atmosphere like gentle evening smoke, which ties the whole together inside itself, which never allows one part to be too proud, to stand out too sharp against the next, but assures that each part melts into its neighbours.

The Implications For Non Profit Organizations

The following are only some beginning statements about what Alexander's 15 properties might mean from an organizational perspective. I suspect, however, that exploring the meaning of each property can only be done within a particular organizational context; and, is best done by relying on the intuitive and personal judgments and wisdoms of the people within.

Levels of scale refers to the gradient from the individual persons, through teams, to the organization as a whole; and, from the work of individual persons, through programs and projects, to broader directions. The point is that the jumps across these levels need to be of the right size (for example: the numbers of people involved) within the context of the particular organization. Note that within the concept of levels of scale there is an implied sense of hierarchy of order, though this is not the same as our traditional understanding of hierarchy of reporting and control.

Boundaries are important, both in defining each centre, giving it its identity and sharpness; and, acting as a transport mechanism (as in a cell wall) for information, the diffusion of new ideas, and organizational energies and resources such as funds. Boundaries relate to the physical nature of the centres, whether persons or teams, but also to the emotional and energy natures of these centres. Boundaries will vary in thickness and shape, depending on factors such as cultural background and personal history. Traditionally, we have thought about organizational boundaries more in hierarchical control languages, identifying and putting in place appropriate reporting lines. But, this misses the point. Boundaries, here, are more lateral in nature. And, larger forms of order arise organically out of the smaller organizational centres. They do not need to be formally created, more formally recognized as they emerge. The essential boundary questions, which need to be directed to each individual person, team, and program, are: What needs to be put in place to strengthen your identity, your living-ness, your spirit; Who do you need to relate to closely; and, How do we ensure that the resources you need flow in a timely manner?

Alternating repetition points to the need for each person, team, program, and centre within the organization to both be similar, and therefore repeating; but, also, not similar, and therefore exhibiting the difference of roughness. The similarity relates to the property of echoes, which suggests that within the essence of an organization, within the spirit, there are a deeper set of patterns (for example: culture, directions, core values, common beliefs, common mission, and collective history) which serve to shape, reinforce, the repeating patterns.

Positive space relates to the issue of boundaries. As I understand this property, organizations that have life, that express life, would be designed so that there is both beauty and spirit within the parts, the centres; but, also within the spaces between the parts, the centres. In other words, no space is empty of life. This also raises the issue of the physical and technological spaces that people within the organization dwell, work, within. It is not possible to create an organization that has life, that expresses life, without

paying serious attention to both the physical and the technological landscapes. Is there beauty in these spaces?

Local symmetries relates to the need to inter-connect those centres, or small groups of centres, that are similar in some sense. These centres and their inter-connections then form larger, and equally strong, centres. This is actually a common organizational design perspective. A map is drawn of all of the parts of the organization, and connections made because of like function (for example: serving a common client group, carrying out similar work, located in a certain geography, or holding common professional interests). What emerges is a series of patterns of parts and inter-connections. Alexander would call these larger centres.

Deep interlock and ambiguity points to the need to see an organization as a series of interlocking or overlapping circles. The circles consist of the smaller parts, the smaller centres. They are connected; but, not in formally demanding or controlling ways. Rather, the relationships are more fluid, more ambiguous. This relates to the arguments that Ralph Stacey has put forward that creativity emerges, for persons, teams, and organizations, within the interstices, within those overlapping grey zones of ambiguity.

Contrast in organizations relates, I think, to the issue of diversity, and to Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme's cosmological principles of life. What we know about diversity is that it is essential, of essence, to organizations if they are to be creative, adaptive, and responsive. This is a core principle of systems theory: the greater the variety within the system, the more the system can both adapt to its environment; and, through self-organization, create higher orders of living form. Traditionally, we have looked more to create homogeneity in our organizations, a form of control. This relates, in part, to our own fears of self diversity, of coming to grips with the different parts, selves, of oneself. Note that most therapies focus on bringing one back to the core self, that essential "you". Contrast suggests otherwise. The challenge is: How much diversity or contrast can we hold within, as persons, teams, or organizations? Or, what glues us together? Traditionally, the answer to this has been to hold on tightly, to glue through commonality (for example: mission, values, beliefs, and policies). Contrast again suggests otherwise, encouraging us to trust in the natural flows of self-organizing systems, where higher orders of form naturally emerge out of difference. These patterns are the echoes.

Gradients refer back to the issue of levels of scale. What is important here are the qualities of slow-ness and soft-ness, whether seen across the organization and its cultural, social, psychological, economic, and physical spaces, or over time. It reinforces the perspective that we can but build organizations with life, that express life, slowly, over years. There is no quick jump start to this process.

Roughness says that, even when parts of the organization are similar, they do not need to be, should not be, the same. In other words, they may have topological similarity, as in the coffee cup being topologically similar to the doughnut, but their forms do not have to be identical. In personal work, these particular forms are the aspects of the ego that

reflect, often dimly, the underlying essences or selves. Again, this relates to the property of echoes. What is similar or parallel are the underlying echoes.

The last three properties, The Void, Simplicity And Inner Calm, and Not-Separateness, relate to the issue of presence. All of us have met individual persons whose presence, whose capacity to be present in each moment, shines out. They have a quiet-ness, a soft-ness, a slow-ness, a calm-ness, and a connected-ness to them that is so obvious. All of us have encountered natural landscapes like this. For me, last summer, it was the misty, blue rolling hills of south Virginia. In this beauty, I encountered quiet, joy, calm, peace, connectedness, and sadness.

We also encounter this, standing before some works of art, a Rodin sculpture for example; or, gazing at some person made landscapes. But, what does this mean for organizations?

We could ask the question about the organization's physical landscape. Is there a place, somewhere within the organization's facilities, where there is this deep sense of quiet, calm, peace, and connectedness? We could also ask the question about the organization's people and leaders. Are there individual persons, or leaders, whose way of being within the organization, brings us to the void, simplicity and inner calm, and not-separateness? We could also ask the question about the organization's practices. Do we, for example, encourage some form of opening meditation before meetings, or a quiet celebration afterwards? Are there rituals? Is prayer seen as a form of organizational communication? I do not know what it would mean for an organization, as a whole, to be connected to the void, to hold simplicity and inner calm, and to be not-separate. I am not sure, after years of managing and consulting, that I have ever encountered such an organization, even though I have encountered such moments within particular organizations. However, as with persons and persons-in-relationship, the end state is not really the issue. It is the journey that matters, that is of matter.

IX - Design And Craft

Christopher Alexander suggests that all great art, beauty, is built slowly, through trial and error, from the ground up. This is the way of the craftsman: the potter, the dancer, a certain style of leadership. There is no grand vision here, the way of the artist; nor, a reliance on technique, the way of the technocrat. More, it is an unfolding journey of designing and re-designing one's way of living and being. Peter Vaill has called this: "learning as a way of being" or "exploring".

Let me try to say this in a way that will convey my feeling as an explorer. I did not have the [goal] the way that you insist that I had it along the way. What I had was a going-forward-toward. That going-forward-toward was a good deal more general than you imagine. It is the non explorers who rather naively assume that once they have a clear picture in mind of where they are going, they can trust that picture through to the end. To be an explorer is to not know where, precisely and concretely, one is going. If that seems obscure, let me put it in a slightly different way. The explorer feels your uncertainty and your fear and even sometimes your fury. However, he or she does not think that these states of mind can be escaped. Instead, they are part of what the explorer explores.

Ralph Stacey points in similar directions. In managing the unknowable (uncharted waters), he argues that we need to let go of our beliefs that: the person in charge is in control through a clear vision and long term plan, there is a person in charge or in control, the organization should be unified, differences are to be avoided, there is a commonly understood "bottom line", what is important is doing better what we do now, and equilibrium is essential.

The trouble with standard maps and traditional navigational principles is that they can only be used to identify routes that others have travelled before: they can only make sense for managing the knowable. ... By definition, innovative strategic directions take an organization into uncharted waters. It follows that no one can know the future destination of an innovative organization. Rather, that organization's managers must create, invent, and discover their destination as they go. If no one knows where the organization is going, then no one can be "in control". Instead managers have to create conditions in which behaviour within the organization is controlled even though no one controls it [self-organizing systems].

If managers cannot know where the organization is going or what the right business philosophy for the future is, they should not all believe in

the same things ... Instead, they should question everything and generate new perspectives through contention and conflict. ... To do this, they must drop the old stable equilibrium mind-set and develop a new one that recognizes the positive role of instability

Let me end with a story I wrote about Cait, an adaptation of an ancient Chinese story about a woodcutter. It is a parable of what I now believe each of us needs to be about, in our own lives, in communities, and in our non profit organizations.

Once, Chang Tzu tells us, there was a master tightrope walker who created such beautiful dances out of air and music that the Crone, herself, demanded to know the secret of her art.

"Your Lady", said the tightrope walker, "There is no secret, but there is something. This is how I begin."

"When I am about to create a dance, I first collect my energies and bring my heart and mind to absolute quietness. I become oblivious of any reward to be gained or any fame to be acquired. When I am free from the influences of all such outer considerations, I can listen to the inner voice which tells me clearly what I have to do."

"When my skill is thus concentrated, I take up my blue wand; I make sure that it is perfectly balanced, that it fits my hand and swings with my arm. Then, I enter the space of the platform. I look for the right moment; the moment that is pregnantly waiting to become my dance. And, when I find it, I ask: What have I for you, and what have you for me?"

*"Then, and only then, do I step out onto the wire, and set to dance."
"I remember how my mentors and teachers taught me to bring my skill and my thought, my body and my soul, into relation with the natural qualities of the air and music, and with the spirit of the wire."*

The Crone said, "When the dance is finished, it has a magical effect upon me; I cannot treat it as any other dance. What is the nature of this magic?"

"Your Lady", said the tightrope walker, "What you call magic comes only from what I have told you."

And I ask: What brought you , my daughter, to the spirit of the wire? What brought the spirit of the wire to you? And, what is my wire now?

Thank you for listening, and sharing this space with me this morning.