OPEN SPACE TECHNOLOGY

A User's NON-Guide

Written by Thirty-Seven OST Practitioners, from Everywhere
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for Harrison Owen and Practitioners Everywhere

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Introduction

Like Open Space itself, this document was discovered, not designed. Its 37 unwitting authors are a small slice of the hundreds whose email writing and community learning fills the OSLIST online archive, which itself holds but half of more than 10 years of dialogue. Which is to say that this is only the tiniest excerpt of what has been going on, around the world, online and elsewhere, for a very long time.

The discovery and publication of this rich little taste is offered here in support of the worldwide conversation and practitioner community that is Open Space Technology. Paired with Harrison Owen's *Open Space Technology, A User's Guide*, it seems to form a simple, powerful springboard for trainings, workshops and practice groups. Unlike the *Guide*, however, this *Non-Guide* doesn't tell you how to 'do' it. What you'll find here are clues and support for the non-doing.

In this way, this Non-Guide is an invitation to go deeper... to invite, to experiment, to reflect and to invite again, deeper and deeper, organizing for yourself(ves) as you go. As you'll see, it's all about the self-organizing spirit that is manifesting everywhere in organizations that work, in open space.

And, yes, it's just a conversation... but how does it stir you?

As a community, we describe Open Space Technology (OST) in many ways: the energy of a good coffee break, the art of finding one more thing to NOT do, an invitation to maximize learning and contribution, and a simple, powerful way to raise spirit and catalyze self-organization. For more about OST, see Appendix A, but for now, suffice it to say that our online practitioner conversations have been all about all of this, and more.

OST practitioners have been learning together in online conversation since at least 1991. The OSLIST email listserve, as currently configured, has been around since 1996. At the time of these conversations, there were more than 300 people participating in that conversation, on at least six continents. We have included, as an appendix, our FAQ (frequently asked questions) document, which is updated and mailed to the list every couple of months. It presents the 'state of the list' at the time these conversations took place in late 2001, early 2002. It will give a bit more

specific background on OST, the OSLIST and other online resources. It's also a seed document, of sorts, as other OS listserve communities are being born in local regions and in languages like Spanish, Russian and Haitian Creole.

The material in this particular document was collected from roughly two months of online conversations, after several of us noticed that perhaps a dozen or more threads all seemed to fit together. As we said, discovered not constructed. And in bringing this material forward for you, we have done virtually no editing, beyond the (relatively) simple, careful splicing together of many threads and branches into a single stream. Taken together, it seems to cover much of what we would want to see included in a training or workshop conversation for advanced practitioners.

Our hunch is that the combination of Harrison Owen's User's Guide and this community-generated Non-Guide gives new practitioner groups everything they need to begin their exploration of the deep spirit and technical practices that are Open Space Technology. We think these conversations about spirit and self-organization do much to support the spirit that is self-organization, everywhere. Maybe they will, maybe they won't -- but this our hope and our experiment.

Like Open Space itself, this material is offered free of charge, for your use and creativity, with one simple request... that you come back to share the stories of how you're using it and what you're learning. Visit http://www.openspaceworld.org and click "OSLIST" to join the worldwide, online, open space conversation or simply email any one of the authors directly.

And, yes, it's all just conversation... until it stirs us into action. So many thanks to Harrison and the rest of our colleagues on the OSLIST, for all the good conversing and all the good action that is coming of it around the world.

Pour the tea, settle back in your chair, and let's go...

Michael Herman and Chris Corrigan
January, 2002

Self-Organization: Spirit Meets Science

It all started quietly enough with a message titled "a space within a space within a space," in November 2001. Birgitt Williams was announcing an upcoming workshop and inviting our participation on a number of levels. Here is a bit of what she said, and what followed, directly and indirectly, over the next 2-3 months...

birgitt williams, north carolina, usa:

...I have come to understand that all organizations are Open Space Organizations. My work has been to assist those that choose to do so, to become conscious of themselves as Open Space Organizations, opening as much space as possible within clear and defined constraints. The paradox seems to be that the clearer the constraints or givens are, the clearer the definition of where the space is open for real degrees of freedom for action and creativity. For me, the conscious Open Space Organization, as I understand it is not a self organizing system. Rather, a matrix or nutrient field is provided that is clearly bounded and ready to nurture whatever is created. The matrix then gets filled in by choices that are life nurturing or life depleting. The conscious Open Space Organizations is life nurturing rather than life depleting. The conscious Open Space Organization is aware that within it, there is always the blueprint for its own health. My vision is for more and more of us to learn about the conscious Open Space Organization, developing within us the skills and capacity to assist organizations as mentors in this way.

harrison owen, maryland, usa:

My friend Birgitt Williams appears to have some difficulty with the notion that organization, forming in Open Space, is in fact self-organization at work. Or in her words, "For me, the conscious Open Space Organization, as I understand it is not a self organizing system." And in answer to the question -- If not self-organization, then what -- she says, "Rather, a matrix or nutrient field is provided that is clearly bounded and ready to nurture whatever is created. The matrix then gets filled in by choices that are life nurturing or life depleting. The conscious Open Space Organizations is life nurturing rather than life depleting." All of which seems to me to be a rather nice description of self-organization at work. Be that as it may, it occurs to me that it might be useful to chat a bit about

why I find the theory of self-organization so attractive, particularly in reference to the Open Space experience, either as event, or a continuing phenomenon.

First off, please note that it is the theory of self-organization. And theory is never to be confused with The Truth or The Facts. It's only theory. But mere theory is a not nothing -- rather it is a way of looking at things (that's what the word in Greek means --"To See"). Or more broadly, a theory is a way of looking at things, enabling comprehension and prediction. In short, with a good theory we find it possible to understand what is going on, and also to make some reasonable predictions about future occurrences.

The formulation of Self-organization theory which I find to be most attractive is that proposed by Stuart Kauffman of the Santa Fe Institute, which he describes in his book, At Home in the Universe (Oxford). Simply stated, Kauffman argues that given certain quite simple pre-conditions "order happens." These pre-conditions include the following:

1) A relatively safe and protected, nutrient environment,
2) High levels of diversity in terms of the elements present in that environment.
3) High levels of complexity in terms of potential inter-connections.
4) A drive for improvement, or in more standard evolutionary terminology, a search for fitness.
5) Sparse prior connections in terms of the available elements (everything is not previous "hardwired."

The whole thing is on the edge of chaos.

Kauffman might be described as a theoretical biologist, although I am not quite sure what he calls himself. His intent is to account for the origin of order, particularly in living creatures, at the molecular level. In a word, he addresses the interesting question as to how we got from primal ooze to us. I am sure the jury of his peers is still out, but quite clearly his colleagues take him seriously, if not with the details, then certainly with the major thrust of his argument.

Needless to say, I am not competent to judge his science, but upon reading his work, I was immediately struck with the similarity between his pre-conditions and what for years I have described as the presenting circumstances for the use of Open Space. Which are:

1) A real business issue of great concern.
2) High levels of complexity in terms of the elements of the issue.
3) High Levels of diversity in terms of those involved.
4) The presence of actual or potential conflict.
5) A decision time of yesterday -- i.e. an urgent need for improvement.

Even without going through a detailed comparison, I would hope that you can see the relationship. And if you do want the details, you might check my book, The Power of Spirit: How Organizations Transform (Berrett-Koehler, 2000).

So what good is all this in practical terms? First off, it provides an interesting way of looking at, and possibly answering, the nagging question (for me) of why Open Space works anyhow. I was

trained to know that organization at the human level only occurred as the product of prodigious effort and great skill. It required brilliant design, execution and endless maintenance. What we experience in Open Space simply cannot happen. But of course it does. It appears that quite inadvertently I stumbled upon the essential pre-conditions of self-organization.

A related question for me has been why does Open Space work just about anywhere it has been tried, regardless of the education, ethnicity, economics, national origin, etc of the group? The answer would appear to be that the groups are "already there." There is nothing new to learn or do, although there may be much to unlearn and stop doing. It would appear, perhaps, that from the moment of the Big Bang, we and all the rest of the cosmos have been operating under what might be called The Laws of Self-Organization, even as we operate under the Laws of Thermodynamics, Gravity, and the like. Seen from this perspective, the "workability" of Open Space is precisely what one would expect, given the essential "Laws" of our environment. One consequence of all this is that the notion of creating an Open Space Organization is a little absurd. It already is -- no creation necessary.

Life for us humanoids, however, seems to be a tad more complex and multi-faceted than life at the level of atoms and molecules. Sorry, there seems to be some hierarchical order. Thus while it is true that we and all rocks are bound by the Law of Gravity, it is obvious that we can to some extent circumvent that Law -- or better -- learn to use it to our advantage. Which is precisely what we do when we fly in an airplane. But it is noteworthy-- the airplane would not work if you eliminated gravity. It is only because we are pulled "down" that we can go "up" -- surfing on a wave of air.

I suspect the same thing is true with the laws of self-organization and their local manifestation every time we open space. We can't repeal those laws, but we can learn to work with them to our advantage. And that for me is the great adventure of the moment. So if you don't like the notion of Self-Organization relative to Open Space, not to worry, it is just a theory. However, to the extent that the theory is explanatory of some previously non-understood phenomenon (Open Space works!???) and is predictive of future conditions, it could be useful. At least I think so.

larry peterson, ontario, canada

I generally think that Harrison has got it mostly right on this one. I think "self-organization" needs also to be put in context. I don't have time for a long or well thought out statement, but here are a few points:

-Self-organization describes the natural, emergent processes of complex systems. And the conditions for it can be enhanced or not. Using Ken Wilber (and Harrison's adaptation) it is a description of what happens in the lower right quadrant, what the collective exterior of all complex systems do.

-Awareness of it is at the "interactive" level of organizational consciousness. It is the growing recognition that organizations are in fact organisms - living. Self-organization is part of what

living things do. It is a useful metaphor for shifting up the spiral (dynamics) from "orange" consciousness (proactive) to a "good" green consciousness (interactive, connected)

-The scientific phrase, "self-organizing" is still "flat land", it does not acknowledge the other quadrants. From a spiritual perspective, at other levels of awareness the self that self-organizes and the Self (and my self) are one.

birgitt williams, north carolina, usa

> *Harrison Owen wrote... My friend Birgitt Williams appears to have some difficulty with the notion that organization, forming in Open Space, is in fact self-organization at work. Or in her words, "For me, the conscious Open Space Organization, as I understand it is not a self organizing system." And in answer to the question -- If not self-organization, then what -- she says, "Rather, a matrix or nutrient field is provided that is clearly bounded and ready to nurture whatever is created. The matrix then gets filled in by choices that are life nurturing or life depleting. The conscious Open Space Organizations is life nurturing rather than life depleting." All of which seems to me tobe a rather nice description of self-organization at work. Be that as it may, it occurs to me that it might be useful to chat a bit about why I find the theory of self-organization so attractive, particularly in reference to the Open Space experience, either as event, or a continuing phenomenon.*
>
> *First off, please note that it is the theory of self-organization. And theory is never to be confused with The Truth or The Facts. It's only theory.*

Harrison, For me, I am clear that the conscious Open Space Organization is not a self organizing system. IT IS MUCH MORE THAN THAT and I am as clear as I can be in my communications that the two for me, do not equal each other. I believe that Spirit is all that is, and that all is Spirit and that we are connected through Spirit. Spirit is powerful and active and there are infinite possibilities.

For me, the conscious Open Space Organization includes self organization at work but is not limited to this definition as a definitive description (or even theory) of either Open Space Technology or the conscious Open Space Organization. Spirit is much more than that. You may see it as useful to use the theory of self organizing systems to explain what happens within Open Space Technology. I see it as limiting and a disservice to the wholeness of Open Space Technology.

The effect we have as facilitators working with energy is very influential in both the Open Space Technology meeting and the conscious Open Space Organization. The matrix I referred to is not a "pre-condition" only but also an ongoing and active ingredient. This is work with energy, with the unseen, with Spirit. Deeply powerful and non-visible. And the facilitator "holding space" influences the self organizing behavior that is part of the Open Space Technology meeting.

I do not believe that there is such a thing as a self organizing SYSTEM. I do think there is self organizing behavior. I do not believe that there is such a thing as a system. I believe systems are illusions, human constructs. We are all one in Spirit.

Harrison, I have huge respect for you as you know. And we both know from about a decade of conversations and debates between us, that we have different perspectives. I think you would be both surprised and disappointed if I agreed with you. Over the years, you taught "opening space for Spirit to show up". I taught "opening space to work with Spirit that is present everywhere always". You taught that organizations are shifting from proactive to interactive and eventually if all goes well to the state of inspired. You taught that with use of Open Space Technology organizations could make that leap from pro-active to interactive. I taught that the inspired organization is always present, exists NOW. The inspired organization simply needs to be uncovered—to get the barriers to accessing Spirit out of the way. I called this the Open Space Organization, and over the last few years as my own learning has evolved, the conscious Open Space Organization. And then of course was the huge debate we had for years regarding "givens". I remember when I introduced the importance of "givens" as essential for working with Open Space Technology, you responded by saying that with "givens" I was going to ruin Open Space Technology. I still stand behind my belief and experience that it is through clear definition of the "givens" that we define where the degrees of freedom really are rather than where they are assumed to be. The "givens" create the matrix (or womb) for the OST meeting to take place.

And now we see the importance of the theory of "self organizing systems" differently. It is not a matter of me not understanding, simply a matter of my view of Spirit with Open Space Technology and the conscious Open Space Organization, my experience with Spirit and my love relationship with Spirit. All of this for me minimizes the importance of "the self organizing system theory". I am informed based on my background in the healing arts and my journey with Spirit.

winston kinch, ontario, canada:

Hey you beautiful people (H and B)! Does it matter so much if inspired organizations "leap into being" or are "uncovered"? Is there anything that prevents a "precondition" from also being an "ongoing and active ingredient"? Meseems you would both acknowledge the ultimate oneness of Spirit (although H is usually more cagey about it) and the existence of "story" - whether it is seen as discovery or recovery or spiral - and besides; there are exactly seven angels on the head of a pin. At least that's what I think but I don't suppose I'm right... With love and respect for you both, Winston

harrison owen, maryland, usa:

I agree, I agree!!! "Uncle!!! Spirit is primary. As the author of a number of books, 4 of which have "Spirit" emblazoned in the title, I would be on pretty shaky ground were I to suggest

otherwise. Displaying my true colors as a total pedant allow me to quote myself from the opening lines of my latest and last, "The Power of Spirit."

This book is about Spirit, and the ways in which Spirit forms and transforms in organizations. It is written from the belief, and experience, that Spirit is the most important thing. When the Spirit of a people is strong, focused, and vibrant, wonderful things can happen. When the Spirit is down, it makes very little difference how good your reputation, how much money you have in the bank, or how strong the need for your goods or services. Not too much happens.

Having said all that, I still find that the theory of self-organization to be very helpful (but not exhaustive) when it comes to understanding how and why Open Space works, how we might work in it -- and more broadly, how organizations work. There might even be some useful clues here as to how Spirit works.

> *Harrison, I have huge respect for you as you know. And we both know from about a decade of conversations and debates between us, that we have different perspectives. I think you would be both surprised and disappointed if I agreed with you. Over the years, you taught opening space for Spirit to show up . I taught opening space to work with Spirit that is present everywhere always . You taught that organizations are shifting from proactive to interactive and eventually if all goes well to the state of inspired. You taught that with use of Open Space Technology organizations could make that leap from pro-active to interactive. I taught that the inspired organization is always present, exists NOW. The inspired organization simply needs to be uncovered to get the barriers to accessing Spirit out of the way. I called this the Open Space Organization, and over the last few years as my own learning has evolved, the conscious Open Space Organization.*

Sure -- No problem. And I would even agree that the Inspired Organization is a present reality, albeit pretty well covered up. When we are lucky and intentional the covers slip away, and we experience ourselves as we actually are -- fully. Our Buddhist friends and others would say that in the evolution of consciousness we move to find "our original face" which is another way of saying, "Its all there from the beginning -- just covered up."

> *And then of course was the huge debate we had for years regarding givens . I remember when I introduced the importance of givens as essential for working with Open Space Technology, you responded by saying that with givens I was going to ruin Open Space Technology. I still stand behind my belief and experience that it is through clear definition of the givens that we define where the degrees of freedom really are rather than where they are assumed to be. The givens create the matrix (or womb) for the OST meeting to take place.*

Truthfully, I think the notion of "givens" is very important. As far as ruining Open Space -- not a chance. And one of the major "givens" for me relative to all organizations is their status as a self-organizing system. Just as we are all limited by gravity, and violate that limitation only at our peril -- so also, I think we are "limited" by the "Laws of Self-Organization" -- which we are just now coming to understand. Which means that we may not have them right. But I think we are

gaining on it. And is that The Whole Story? Absolutely not. Just a place of beginning. As for the grand debate --- You win!

Birgitt, I love your spirit, and your love of Spirit. Keep it up!

tim sullivan, british columbia, canada:

The conundrum of the term "self-organizing" when thinking about organizations (which are social) is: What is the "self" of an organization or social phenomenon? That's one idea. Another is: I would say it is the radical difference between biological organisms and social organizations that must be considered for a truly explanatory, predictive theory to be developed; not the similarity between them. Kauffman's simulations of molecular based processes to model the arising of self-organizing systems (i.e. organisms) is useful, but does it capture all the characteristics of social systems? Again until we consider the radical differences between organisms and their eco-environments and social organizations and the meta-systems that constitute their environment, we will not have truly powerful understanding for organizational change and transformation. I suggest that because humans have the capacity for self-reflexive communication, and because social organizations exhibit that same capacity, reflexivity is an emergent property of social organizations, which manifests as the tendency for radical transformation. (e.g. Wilber's appropriation of the meme levels of Spiral Dynamics...evolving memes suggests dynamic evolution) Something we don't see in biological organisms. Organisms change structure (form) but the underlying organization is the same eg DNA-protein-cell membranes etc. Whereas social organizations not only exhibit different forms, they can exhibit radically differing states of awareness (meme-levels).

nino novak, germany:

> *My friend Birgitt Williams appears to have some difficulty with the notion that organization, forming in Open Space, is in fact self-organization at work. Or in her words, "For me, the conscious Open Space Organization, as I understand it is not a self organizing system."*

Dear Harrison, are you pointing at the paradox that self-organisation occurs anyway - even if we "try to win" (i.e. to influence the outcome)? So - when I try hard to achieve a certain result, am I then hindering self-organisation? (I don't think so, I rather think that my "directed" activities are part of the process of self-organisation of the system I live in). On the other hand, I think that actions of human beings are to a great extent motivated by somewhat like their biological needs. And the means they use (e.g. military power, or demagogic speech, or personal communication) are the means that they feel to be adequate to achieve their goals. Now, in my personal judgement there are certain means I don't like, and others I do prefer. I like to feel empowered, active, cooperative and constructive. And I enjoy "group feelings", when things like "success" or "love" happen to happen. (Sometimes I think that, the opener the space - the more I like the

process ;-) My question now is, why not "try to consciously open space"? Is it a contradiction in re? (or have I basically misunderstood your thoughts?)

harrison owen, maryland, usa:

What started as a small "chat" now seems to be developing into a full blown conversation. Wonderful! And as it proceeds, I think it is most important to recognize that all of us (and certainly myself) are venturing into uncharted territory. We are not alone on this expedition, and there are some useful road maps created by the likes of Kauffman, Wilber, Prigogene, Dawkins, Kelly, Coveney, Wheatley and many more. But it remains true that the map is not the territory, the menu is not the meal, and for sure the book is not the experience. Having said all that it is clear to me that the global conversation on the subject of self-organization has progressed well beyond the level of purely hypothetical statements. There is some genuine experience here, and the beginnings of what be called a practice (something to be done).

Under the heading of experience and practice, I believe that we, in what might be called the Open Space community, have a special, and possibly privileged position -- our 15 year encounter with what I like to think of as the Open Space experiment. Nobody, and certainly not myself "designed" this experiment. And for sure the "creation" of Open Space Technology out of my martini enhanced brain had nothing to do with the conscious design of an advanced human technology based upon the emerging scientific understanding of self-organization. It just happened. To be truthful, I had been fascinated with the work of Ilya Prigogene in the 70's -- but I never put 2 +2 together, until much later. But Open Space did happen, and it does happen. And we have the opportunity, and I think responsibility, to ask Why? How? and Where do we go next? And so to the conversation...

> *Tim Wrote: Again until we consider the radical differences between organisms and their eco-environments and social organizations and the meta-systems that constitute their environment, we will not have truly powerful understanding for organizational change and transformation. I suggest that because humans have the capacity for self-reflexive communication, and because social organizations exhibit that same capacity, reflexivity is an emergent property of social organizations, which manifests as the tendency for radical transformation.*

Absolutely. I couldn't agree more. Rocks and human beings are different, but both share a common substrata of existence. Thus if I drop a rock and a human, both will fall (thanks to gravity), but the human will typically know that he or she is falling, and have certain feelings about the situation. The addition of knowledge and feelings which collectively we might call awareness, certainly makes a richer stew. And then when folks talk about it all (self-reflexive communication) -- things do get complicated. Thus when we consider the process of self-organization, or its more radical and painful form -- Transformation -- in human beings (groups or individuals), we would expect certain additional processes to handle the added complexity. I think this is where Griefwork comes in. When Chaos strikes a rock it keeps on being a rock or some transformed version of it. When Chaos strikes us we commence to grieve the loss of what was -- leading (hopefully) to the emergence of what might be. Shock, Anger, Denial... Just think of 911.

I think we see all this going on in our "natural experiment" every time we open space. Things begin in Chaos -- there's confusion, lack of answers, anxiety -- and if that weren't true -- why bother to do Open Space? And if we keep our eyes open, we can observe the Griefwork process commencing. Stories are told of how it used to be. Pain is shared. Bitches expressed -- and over time as the group self-organizes in a new form -- all of that leads to some form of vision, resolution, moving on. At least it certainly can. And should you ask -- is that the whole story? Probably not -- but at least it gives us a starting point towards understanding the process of self-organization in the human dimension. But it is just a starting point. Larry Peterson has a useful caveat...

The scientific phrase, "self-organizing" is still "flat land", it does not acknowledge the other quadrants. From a spiritual perspective, at other levels of awareness the self that self-organizes and the Self (and my self) are one.

> *And From Nino Novak... So - when I try hard to achieve a certain result, am I then hindering self-organisation? (I don't think so, I rather think that my "directed" activities are part of the process of self-organisation of the system I live in).*

What I am suggesting is that the principles (Law?) of self-organization are analogous to the Law of Gravity. All critters, including us, are subject to the same laws, but that is not the end of the story. We can build and fly airplanes, and presumably rocks can't. However we would be very ill-advised to dis-regard the law of gravity. It could be painful. By analogy, I suspect that all organizations are essentially self-organizing systems, and that they (we, us, me) along with all the rest of the cosmos do not escape. But just as we can learn to use the laws of gravity for our benefit (planes for example) so also we can learn to use the Laws of Self-Organization. But we must start with a recognition of the laws -- which for me are the primal "givens," and everything else is pretty much negotiable.

This insight or recognition cuts right to the core of much of the current understanding of how organizations work, and how we work with organizations. Many managers and executives at least say that their job is to create and organize the system. I think it would be more accurate (efficient and profitable) if they were to understand that their job was to create and sustain the conditions under which self-organization may occur and continue. There is a needed change of metaphors here -- from auto mechanics who build machines to gardeners who understand that at the end of the day, the flowers will grow all by themselves, or not. Water and fertilizer help -- but the flowers do their own thing.

We have learned from Open Space that the one way to mess it up is to try and control it. And a close second is to have a fixed attachment to specific outcomes. Either or both of these things can bring the whole process to a shuddering halt. This is not to say that we can't have "intentions" -- or that we should not have hopes for a positive outcome -- but when it comes to the details of the outcomes or how we get there -- I believe the experience has been -- You have to Let Go.

Having said all of that, I definitely take your point -- "I rather think that my "directed" activities are part of the process of self-organisation of the system I live in." True, true, true -- and I might

suggest that the impact of your "directed activities" will be vastly enhanced to the extent that you understand (as you obviously do) the context in which those activities all take place -- in the midst of a self-organizing system. The bottom line is, you are not in control. None of us are -- although maybe all of us are.

kenoli oleari, california, usa:

At a workshop last year, Harrison Owen commented that he thought all organizations were self organizing, that they all manage to "muddle through", making their own way, in spite of CEOs, strategic plans, budget constraints and horrible (or sometimes excellent) management practices (including OD consultants). This is one perspective. And, I suspect, that our conscious or unconscious awareness and appreciation (this does feel good when you area a part of it) of this aspect of organizations is what moves us to try to make systems self-organizing. What we are probably really doing (and OS is a prime example of this effort) is to get out of the way of this process as much as possible. How many leaders have thought they were running an organization only later to realize that the organization was very well running itself?

In addition, there are many people who have tried to list characteristics of "self-organizing" systems and many large group consultants whose work is about trying to support these characteristics. Thus we do things like give people a chance to tell each other their stories, talk about past and present experience, reflect on what has worked in the organization, make decisions, share "successes" together and dream together.

And then there is the quality of "group", the added element and experience that results from doing things together, sometimes, feeling almost spiritual. For a wonderful treatise on this see "Centered on the Edge: Mapping a Field of Collective Intelligence and Spiritual Wisdom" published by the Fetzer Institute http://www.fetzer.org. The power of group may be a next step in human development.

Hunting and Gathering

chris corrigan, british columbia, canada:

Okay. Now that we have a self-organizing explosion of threads taking place, let me extend one small side spoke a little, only because it is touches on a recent contemplative passion of mine. This doesn't have to go anywhere, but I feel the need to say it.

> *Harrison Owen wrote: There is a needed change of metaphors here -- from auto mechanics who build machines to gardeners who understand that at the end of the day, the flowers will grow all by themselves, or not. Water and fertilizer help -- but the flowers do their own thing.*

I agree with the need for a different metaphor, but I don't think that gardening is it. The point about water and fertilizer kind of underscores my point: gardens (in the commonly accepted sense) do not self-organize. Not at all. They require a tremendous amount of planning, cultivation and work. You must beat back weeds and nurture the things that you DO want to grow. You must water if your chosen plants are not native to your area. You must mulch if they fear cold.

In short, gardening is, in my mind, the very antithesis of the new metaphor. It requires a large amount of energy from outside the system to be put into the system. That energy then dissipates with often disastrous results for the surrounding system (algae blooms in local waterways from over use of fertilizer, faster than normal water run off from lawns requiring more water to be added to compensate for the water running off, creating erosion and the rapid disappearance of your growing medium....). Gardening creates needs that send systems into sometimes devastating feedback loops.

My preferred metaphor is that of the hunter/gatherer. For a hunter/gatherer, the landscape is rich to begin with and requires no further intervention to make it that way. Hunters and wildcrafters protect systems by using them sparingly, thus preserving and sustaining their yield without threatening the context in which they operate. And if the system collapses, hunters can move on to another piece of land. They are adaptable, resourceful and flexible. Gardeners (and by extension, farmers) fence off their land, battle against the elements and try to preserve what they have. If the system collapses they are hooped.

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There is a new book out by Hugh Brody which explores this metaphor as it applies to cultures. I have a link to a review of it and some further musings on this at
http://www.chriscorrigan.com/miscellany/bijournal/01-08-2001.htm

I realize that the map is not the territory, but while we are at play in the field of the metaphors, I thought i would throw that intervention in and see if it had resonance. Hunter/gatherer is my business model. Having been a gardener in my years with the federal government in Canada, I realized that, beautiful as they are, growing cacti in the rain forest just isn't sustainable. Either you defend the enterprise to it's inevitable death (and the to the detriment of the context which nurtures it), or you give it up and try to think of something else to do.

Us hunter/gatherer types just glide across the landscape, eating berries and keeping an eye out for the next big (and tasty) thing.

tim sullivan, british columbia, canada:

Good thought, Chris, however....with 5 Billion plus on the planet now, and increasing by leaps and bounds....we can't all be hunter/gatherers. It is a metaphor of 'go lightly' that is feasible with much smaller numbers, and will not drive the system to the "edge of chaos". The eco-system will be stable. We live in different times. Now, its chaos for breakfast, lunch, dinner and midnight snack. And the 'edge' is becoming the 'brink'.

harrison owen, maryland, usa:

Ah Chris -- you have fallen into my trap, made my point -- and my day. The gardening you are talking about is that practiced by an auto-mechanic. Everything according to the plan. Bolt on a new plant and forget its natural habitat. After all that is what it says in "Home and Gardens" -- and every homeowner MUST follow the rules. And for sure take some exotic creature that can't stand cold and plant it in the Arctic. After all it is a part of the plan. Wheeeeew -- hard work for sure. But is that the only way??? You could see what grew naturally -- all by itself. And then help it along. That is really what I am talking about. Look before you leap. Don't fix it if it ain't broke -- and I am sure some other trite phrases would cover the issue.

chris corrigan, british columbia, canada:

Laughing my head off! Not the first time I've fallen into a trap of yours, big guy!

> *That is really what I am talking about. Look before you leap. Don't fix it if it ain't broke -- and I am sure some other trite phrases would cover the issue.*

...uh, yes. That's what I'm saying too. Have a good weekend. I'm off to eat fern rhizomes... wondering if there is a smiley for "rolling eyes."

chris again:

> *Tim Sullivan wrote: Good thought, Chris, however....with 5 Billion plus on the planet now, and increasing by leaps and bounds....we can't all be hunter/gatherers. It is a metaphor of 'go lightly' that is feasible with much smaller numbers, and will not drive the system to the "edge of chaos". The eco-system will be stable. We live in different times. Now, its chaos for breakfast, lunch, dinner and midnight snack. And the 'edge' is becoming the 'brink'.*

We can't all be farmers either. Not so much a case of "either/or" for me, so much as "both/and."

Also not sure about the idea that farmers are better at handling chaos, especially "auto mechanic" farmers, as "ho" has just pointed out. Usually chaos involves people traveling every which way over a field full of freshly planted crops. If you are wedded to that land, you're sunk. Therefore, farmers generally have to fence in their stuff, defend against intrusions and lash out at anyone who wants a piece of it. Low tolerance for chaos. Hunter/gatherers (HGs) are able to move because, while they might be dependent on a few species, they don't care where those species are. If an upheaval strikes, they move.

In the same way, businesses and organizations that are "farmers" fence in their market share or property or copyrights and defend themselves against the threats to their future. HG organizations move with the times, exhibit flexibility and an ability to thrive in widely differing climates. Myers-Briggs is a farm. Open Space is a hunting territory. HGs are better at surfing chaos because they are a part of it. Farmers/gardeners take, as their raison d'être, the taming of the chaos, the assumption of which is always a prelude to a drowning.
Cheers, Chris ...currently a trapped HG.

j. paul everett, washington, usa:

Well, this prompted a thought on your thought. When we look at the long wave history of humankind, we see only two eras of truly fundamental change. Not that change didn't occur in the other epochs, but it wasn't a truly paradigmatic shift. The first was when mankind stopped being hunter/gatherers and became farmers and herds- keepers. This was an enormous change that gave rise to civilization and more importantly, a small, very small, slice of the population that could then be supported by the rest and who then had time to think---and all elements in this world of human origin are first a thought. The invention of mathematics by an Indian genius, the invention of cities, record keeping, writing, etc., mostly in Sumer, were monstrous leaps up off the veldt 6000+ years ago. And, they enabled many more people to live, and therefore, many more thoughts to appear/be had, and therefore, human-created newness to happen.

To illustrate my thesis that then no further fundamental change happened for a very long time, take King Solomon and George Washington, living about 3,000 years apart. Yet, they had, essentially, the same heating, the same lighting, the same transportation (nobody went faster than a horse on land or a sail boat would go on water), same mode of communication (written or

verbal, delivered by a person), slave power and very similar medicine. In fact, it was not until 1939-40 that medical science had something that would reliably, knowledgeably (on the part of the prescriber) fight a disease inside the human body---that was sulfanilamide, followed in short order by penicillin, etc. (Saved my brother's life, btw).

The next big change in human consciousness about man's relationship to reality came someplace in 1740-1785/90 when the Enlightenment fundamentally altered ideas about the source of change and what humans might do about it. From that incredible shift we have the modern civilization that we exist in, filled with ever-increasing rates of change on multiple fronts. Is it any wonder that the Modernists and Post-Modernists are much hated by the Medievalists? We are destroying what existed for millennia. And, that we have multiple troubles adjusting to that pace of change on so many fronts. But, in the process mankind is becoming even more free, at least those able to avail themselves of technologies and new thoughts that generate newness, world wide.

Therefore, I challenge whether the hunter/gatherer is a viable metaphor for any organization in this epoch of man. It certainly can't support the aggregation of brains necessary to create what we now have. It would seem rather that Prigogine's model, or George Land's model, or some other model might better describe what works best at this point in humankind's history. Perhaps the cybernetic model, or Open Space as a model, together with it's self-organizing characteristics is what's really required in these times. Chaos, complexity and emergence seem to be expanding our understanding of the Universe, at least it appears so to me. Just a thought or two.

chris corrigan, british columbia, canada

> *j. paul everett wrote: Therefore, I challenge whether the hunter/gatherer is a viable metaphor for any organization in this epoch of man. It certainly can't support the aggregation of brains necessary to create what we now have. It would seem rather that Prigogine's model, or George Land's model, or some other model might better describe what works best at this point in humankind's history. Perhaps the cybernetic model, or Open Space as a model, together with it's self-organizing characteristics is what's really required in these times. Chaos, complexity and emergence seem to be expanding our understanding of the Universe, at least it appears so to me.*

I agree with you for the most part there. OST is my map for surfing the universe, and my surfboard is hunter/gatherer technology.

I haven't tried to put a value on farming vs hunting and gathering. Just that they describe two different approaches. They do different things well and have different drawbacks. That's why I replied to Tim's post that it was not a case of either/or, but both/and.

I can't remember who put together the "conditions for life" list that gets kicked around (Kauffman right?), and I don't have it at my fingertips, but one of the things that facilitates the emergence of life is when a bunch of molecules have "no prior connections." That is, they are free to bind to whatever comes along. If they are locked up, their potential for development becomes severely limited.

From my perspective, when we talk about facilitating self-organizing systems, the HG metaphor works well because it is not tied down, not already taken up with prior connections. There is a myth that cultivation of the earth resulted in cultivation of the mind. Having others cultivate food certainly allowed for those who weren't farming to engage in other pursuits, which in a sense was a liberating moment for some. For others it was the beginning of a long period of slavery and powerlessness. One person cannot grow food for 1000 others without some help. And often this help took the form of unpaid labour, like slavery. Having slaves work the land is an almost universal experiment, and it certainly continues to this day. Furthermore, the farmer is not any freer for being a farmer. Farmers themselves rarely have time to do anything other than farm (or keep their slaves in line).

My point is that is very much the business model I see around me. Lots of folks here in the Vancouver area get up early in the morning, go off to work and stay there for 14 hours where they do everything in their power to fence in their enterprise and - yes - grow it. They protect their market share, open up new fields of endeavor, grow the business and reap the rewards. All a very agrarian model, right down to the language. And for the most part a model that ties them down to the same thing year after year. There might be moments of creativity and perhaps even room for brilliance, if it's not too risky, but most people who pursue that life are like the farmers of old. Tied to the land, providing goods and services and an economic engine so the rest of us can float above all that and pursue higher agendas of liberation. People that are really discovering things, like really big things, are not busy trying to protect things.

Harrison is a case in point, with his now infamous story about why he didn't copyright OST. Two instructive reasons here: a) you can't patent breathing and b) having patented it, he would be defending the patent rather than opening space, and that kind of activity (the defending part), although it might have made him rich, wouldn't have allowed much time for two martini lunches, and trap-setting for his young friends.

Anyway, good post Paul. I still stand by my use of the HG as my own business model, as it has served me well in encounters with chaos (which sometimes wears the robes of invitation, sometimes the mantle of Shiva...one can never be sure...)

>   *Just a thought or two.*

...spawning eight...

larry peterson, ontario, canada:

To me, "self-organization" is a metaphor that is used to describe the fact that patterns of relationships between entities emerge when the conditions or present and that some principles are usually involved in those conditions. Atoms, rocks, life, organizations, meme's are all emerge in to being. (According to Graves and the Spiral Dynamics folks, memes are "self-organizing".) Every thing manifests in every moment out of its relationships to "entities" in the past moment (according to Whitehead, and I think he's right). Our consciousness as humans shapes that

emergence, but I think aspects of the process of becoming can be described and some of the principles can be described.

Those patterns of relationships between people are shifted, in some time and space, when the space is intentionally opened. When the Principles and Law are brought to consciousness. It may be that opening the space is a "hunter" thing, Chris, to do for an outside consultant, at least it's intentional. It may allow for a new "garden" of changed (or even new) relationships to form for awhile in an organization. Whether that garden continues to grow in that organization or community is dependent on many things. It can enable people to experience (sometimes consciously) a new way to relate that the "control" processes they have been using. It certainly leads to new connects, new leaning and often an experience of a higher or deeper level of spirited working and being together.

I think "Self" organization has taken on some important meaning, particularly for those of us with a "green" orientation because it counters the proactive (orange) view that every thing has to be proactively managed. It is a step in our understanding of phenomena, of what happens and helps me clarify what to do and not to do, what to expect and to be surprised about.

joelle lyons everett, washington, usa:

Thanks, Chris, for this hunter/gatherer metaphor. I think the place where you and Harrison come together on this is that neither gardeners nor gatherers can control what comes along, though gardeners put a lot of effort into trying to control. And some of us do garden with much less intervention than your example!

jeff aitken, california, usa:

I've been working on the notion that when we participate in Open Space Technology we are acting as hunters and gatherers do -- following our intuitive and rational capacities across a diverse and shifting landscape into situations that seem meaty (or may bear fruit)...then returning to the circle around the fire to share what we found for the nourishment of all. In a multi-day OST I often use the metaphor of a group moving thru the wide forest by day and then meeting in a clearing at night and the next morning.

I see "open space" as exactly that - a large, open field filled with issues and opportunities. We are individually invited to make our own journeys thru this open space, working alone, in pairs, or in small groups as the situation requires, in service to the whole group as well as ourselves. It's a wise way to make sense of a shifting, chaotic environment.

Maybe this is one way to see why open space helps people and organizations in modern societies develop the wherewithal to respond to chaos. Perhaps we are re-learning capacities that have been dormant because of the controlled environments we have attempted to live in for several generations. (Then again, is there anything so hunter/gatherer as taking a family thru a shopping mall during Christmas season?)

Hugh Brody's book Maps and Dreams contains wonderful descriptions of the holistic work of hunting/gathering. It's a current practice of life for many thoughtful, technology-using, and spiritually competent people. If humanity is evolving, we are all evolving together, and I don't want to disregard the experience of those outside our familiar circles, because we will probably need it.

Self-Organization: An Indian Perspective

prasad kaipa, california and india:

I have not contributed to OSList for a long time though I do read and keep in touch. Thanks for all the wonderful thoughts.

Here are some reflections on self organization from Indian spirituality perspective.

Self-Organizing principle refers to spirit organizing itself. considering that Spirit is referred to as Brahman in Vedanta and it represents the whole. When we want to look at the organizing principle---the intelligence it is called Purusha. Nature on the other hand is the field in which organizing takes place and it is called Prakriti. The dance between the two -- Purusha and Prakriti creates the world as it manifests dynamically and continually. Each living or non-living entity in the universe has both Purusha and Prakriti. In rocks, there is more nature and less of intelligence. In humans there is more intelligence and less of nature. Other than that, we are both having same ingredients with different ratios.

When we try to organize and do not take into account Prakriti or nature consciously, then we are ignoring one half of the equation and the result does show up sooner or later. In other words, nature takes its own time but will make its move that corresponds to our move. Control means ignoring the totality of the system and behaving as if there is a causality. Control means ignoring the fact that what happens in the world is more of a cosmic dance -- dance of Shiva and shakti -- dance of organizing intelligence and nature -- dance of matter and energy and behaving as if one half of the equation controls the other half.

Self Organization means putting the intention out -- that is critical because without it, the dance becomes more evolutionary -- and letting go of attachment to it. By doing that, the identification or ego with identity is removed and then we become 'open' to all possibilities instead of the one we intended. That kind of center less awareness -- or awareness of awareness -- is what makes self organizing to be creative and not just evolutionary.

Open space allows for that kind of expression for creativity and generativity to interrupt evolution. Such discontinuity does not exist through control but through 'allowing' for that space to remain open despite conflicts, despite chaos. Then comes the time for integration of that discontinuity with the rest of the dance and that is what makes those 'generative' or 'creative' possibilities to be integrated into continuity. In other words, it becomes part of new evolutionary patterns.

I am sure some of your heads are aching by this abstract piece but hope for some of you it makes sense. Metaphors are great and there are additional ways to include experience, concepts, abstraction and stories with it for the knowing to emerge

harrison owen, maryland, usa:

Welcome Prasad! It is always good to smoke out a "Lurker." Particularly one who is an old friend and "openspacer." Even more so when he takes the discussion in some new and (I think) interesting directions. More please !! And for anyone who cares, if you want to meet Prasad in an earlier incarnation, check out my book, "Expanding Our Now." He shows up as the "enfant terrible" in the first chapter who catalyzed a wonderful Open Space into a fantastic one. Great to have you online. And don't be a stranger.

joelle lyons everett, washington, usa:

Your discussion does not make my head ache, but it does put it to work. I do like the reminder that we need to include both intelligence and field. I suspect that many of us in the west put all our focus on will and intention, without considering the whole system in which that intention needs to work. And I'm not sure that even systems thinking gets us to the inclusive place that you point out. I'd like to carry that concept around in my head for a while, and look at the world in that light.

**michael herman,
chicago, usa:**
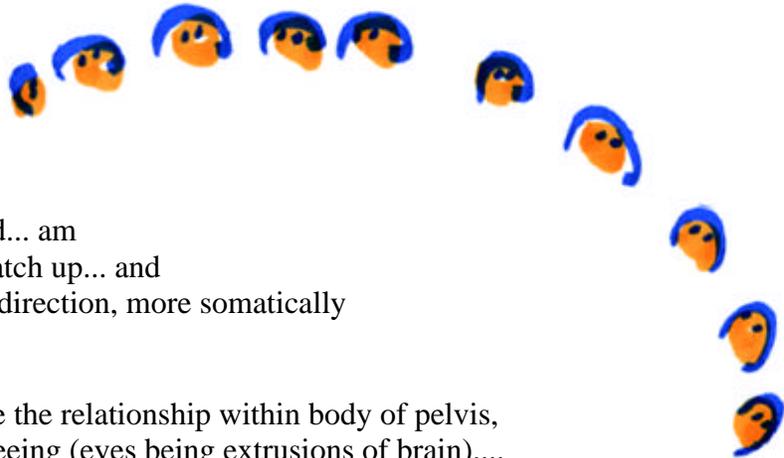
hello harrison, chris, paul, prasad,
jeff and all... thanks for this thread... am
swirling a bit now and trying to catch up... and
wanting to take this in a different direction, more somatically
grounded...

have been working lately to notice the relationship within body of pelvis,
heart and brain... power, caring, seeing (eyes being extrusions of brain)....
linking to the beginnings of this thread, hunter/gatherer relies on the movement of
legs and pelvis, as you say chris, this thread does have legs! farming is more about caring for that
space that we can get our arms and fences around, agriculturally and in legal/business ways,
technology, which paul raises as the third wave, is all about knowing and seeing more... and the
challenge now seems the ability to develop all of these and to pulse between these more quickly
and easily until they unite... hunt/gather, farm, tech... pelvis, heart, brain... power, caring,
seeing... and then we could add harrison's reactive, responsive, proactive... and all this mirrored
in our the current level of brain structure... reptilean, limbic and neocortex... reptilean and limbic
brains are old and already merged, neocortex is new and still not fully integrated from where it
sits atop limbic structures... reflex, emotion, rationality... moving toward integration, interactive,
soul (as harrison says... getting it all together)...

...yes, i think a reawakening of dormant pelvic power is one thing that happens in open space...
when we literally give people their feet back... and we ask them to connect their hearts to that

power, by tying the use of power to passion (caring) and responsibility (their ability to fence something in as theirs to cultivate)... and then we also stack on top of all of this our various technologies, from bulletin board to computer, so that they can see what is going on in the bigger body that emerges in open space....

most important learning for me in open space is that the process invites us to be powerful, caring and smart all at once... while other/traditional/formal/or whatever forms of organization usually pit these against each other in order to limit all... labor and management meet as power and smarts, caring is farmed out to human resources...

...having been out walking in the dark some years ago, not seeing too well, and stepped off a small cliff, landing on rock with pelvis has led me to pay more attention to how i bring my own awareness, care and movement to these various aspects of self, especially when i'm opening and holding space.

not sure how to ask a question from here, or how this fits in, but like chris, just wanted to get this into the mix here... again, many thanks to all and yes my head did ache a bit prasad, but probably from the weight of reading so many messages in a row! good to see you here again!

j. paul everett, washington, usa:

Michael, Jeff, Prasad, et. al.; Thank you for your thoughtful posts. It prompted me to go deeper into the metaphor and especially George Land's model for change in Grow or Die. I remembered that the third phase, Mutualism, reaches back and integrates those elements that were left out, or replaced, when the second phase change occurred (from Accretive to Replicative).

How that might fit (and Michael, I sure liked the integrative viewpoint you have brought to this thread) is that when we were experimenting with villages, farming, herdskeeping, etc., we were very busy trying to find what worked. Hunter-gathering was dropped because it no longer worked well enough. Then, for 6000 years or so, we were busy Replicating what worked out of the Accretive phase and only in the past 250 or so have we been moving into a long arc Mutualistic phase. We are probably just on the very left-hand edge of it (the bump just before the phase change is "permanent" is the "back to the basics" movement in several sectors of our society, like education, which indicates that the old is really dying) and we are again experimenting with "what works" as we move forward. Lots to trying and failing---failure being absolutely essential to learning.

Part of the Mutualistic phase is the reaching back into the Accretive and early Replicative and bringing forward elements that must now be integrated into the third phase in order that it may fully flower. So, Chris, you are probably a leading edge person who is trying to find out how hunter/gathering fits in the emerging epoch. Reaching back to bring forward. A significant challenge that Michael helped to place in context.

Assuming Land's model to be somewhat correct, we must also remember that while Mutualism is growing and flowering, another Accretive phase is beginning to build right underneath it where

something significantly new (a macro paradigm shift, if you will) is forming while Phase III is happening in all it's glory. Wonder what that is going to be? Considering the time spans we have been looking at, and the fact that change is also accelerating at near warp speed, we might get a glimpse of it before we die and we might not. Maybe it will be our 5th-generation-out children that will begin to see it emerge. Ah, to be a healthy, vibrant Methuselah.

Mentioning Methuselah, there is a delightful poem about him that begins:

"Methuselah ate what he found on his plate, And never as we do now, Did he note the amount of the calorie count, He ate it because it was chow."...............

A little humor on a Sunday morning......

reinhard kuchenmueller, munich, germany:

> *Prasad wrote: ...In other words, nature takes its own time but will make its move that corresponds to our move. Control means ignoring the totality of the system and behaving as if there is a causality. Control means ignoring the fact that what happens in the world is more of a cosmic dance...*

Thank you Prasad, I simply love it.

> *...behaving as if there is a causality ...*

your input makes me think: ever so often we are not aware of the patterns we carry with us, and they seem to have to do a lot with religion(s) and believesystems.

That brings me to a thought or two - or rather some questions. The western culture owes a lot to Greece, arts, philosophy, architecture, democracy - why not the religion? The Greeks had a diversity of gods, bigger or smaller, stemming from the same roots as men, more like big brothers and sisters. a world of gods familiar to most cultures, Romans, Germans, Celts. - and Hindus?

> *a lot of open space for development, I think. can you imagine we still had this world of gods?*

Instead we in the west were formed by the idea of one god, absolut, totally, the abstraction of good, light, right, extreme and perfect (and without a strong counterpart on the side of the abstraction of bad and dark). a god, far beyond possible human understanding. following is a concept of guilt and sin. much hierarchy, structure, obedience, systems. causality. the base of the western civilisation.

Some 3-400 years after Christ there grew a world religion called Manichaeism, which has disappeared inbetween, with a very interesting concept, if I get it right. a concept of two extremes, light and dark, both in their absoluteness dangerous for men, both in their pure essence just too

much for men and since extremely unhuman. menkind inbetween, struggling, fighting, laughing, dancing, asking for the sense of life. everyone on his way, seeking and responsible. I am touched by this view of the world .

Just to mention a few.

When there is no causality, men might have developed different ideas and visions about god and gods hand in hand with their beginning forms of organisation or systems. Might be that men, as they are, tended to close formerly open spaces, by systems of power, money, fundamentally organized believe systems ... Might be they kept somehow a hidden memory of openness, might be all of us still carry this dream and are touched, when someone comes along and shows the access to an open space.

Open Space Technology is a beautiful experience for those people coming out of closed spaces and afterwards going back into the closed spaces around us. And if we open up, it certainly has the capacity to shake our believe systems. and then? Can we go on as rebels? Or am I again behaving as if there is a causality?

birgitt williams, north carolina, usa:

hello reinhart, In your message to Prasad you said "Open Space Technology is a beautiful experience for those people coming out of closed spaces and afterwards going back into the closed spaces around us. And if we open up, it certainly has the capacity to shake our believe systems. and then? "

I change a track here and now on the subject of belief systems, which is interesting, there is a wisdom (that I can't remember where I heard it) which teases me and challenges me in life "Who I think I am is a belief to be undone". I offer this to you as an answer to "and then?"

The Theology of Self-Organization

jim metcalf, ontario, canada:

The discussion on self-organization has been most interesting. You have stimulated my thinking, and I would like to share it with you in the hope that you will criticize and improve my thoughts.

All organizations are necessarily self-organizing, even those that are tyrannically organized by a single person exercising control over others. This is because any organizer becomes part of the organization by the act of organizing. It appears that "self-organization" as we use the term in our Open Space discussions, refers to democratically self-organized systems that do not have a layer of tyrannical organization imposed along side of the democratic self-organization. On the other end of the continuum from democratically self-organized systems are tyrannically organized systems. In these, one, or a few, individuals create and maintain the organization for their own ends. (I do not imply that this is morally evil, though it may be.) The problem for tyrannically organized systems (or the saving grace for them, depending on your point of view) is that their people tend towards democratically self-organized systems, and away from the tyrannical system.

Example 1: The army supply sergeant who swaps parts outside of official requisition channels because that is the most efficient way to provide for his company of soldiers. Example 2: Those of us who take orders or advice, and then solve the problem our own way anyhow. Example 3: The mid-level employee in a large government bureaucracy who happily works outside of channels to do great good deeds, knowing that he may be protected by the sheer size of the organization, and his own audacious success.

So, I'm proposing that we have a continuum. On one end is the nearly pure democratically self-organized system. On the other end of the continuum is the tyrannically organized system, which must always contend with the natural inclination of people to self-organize in order to meet their own needs.

One thing that seems to make Open Space work is that it goes with the flow. It takes advantage of people's natural inclination to self-organize, to have input into their own destiny, to be free.

I believe the other thing that makes Open Space work is its reliance on "Word" to create the self-organizing system. The words that are shared in Open Space create order out of the initial chaos. The words that are shared in Open Space also prevent the continuing chaos of people acting individually without words, without communication, without coordination, without care for another's ideas.

Thinking is a social process. There are many ways to think (theologically as a Hindu, a Christian, a Muslim, for example), or statistically, or economically, or . Even though this is so, there is a common process underlying all of these modes that makes communication and cooperation

possible. Although our words may not perfectly communicate, they do well enough for us to touch each other's souls. This is the power of Open Space.

harrison owen, maryland, usa:

Good thought! But I might suggest a different phrasing. In the beginning there were self-organizing systems to which there has been a continuum of response -- ranging from tyrannical to democratic. Self-organization is intrinsically neither, and is prior to both. However, it seems to function much better at the democratic end of things if only because it is then free to be itself. How about that?

jim metcalf, ontario, canada:

I like that: better theology, too.

Free- Will and Mediation

julie smith, alaska, usa:

Is anyone else wondering whether there is a link between what we mean by "self-organization" and what we mean by "free will?"   Clarification about the similarities and/or differences between these two concepts would help me understand this conversation more fully.

harrison owen, maryland, usa:

We could get into terrible philosophical run-about detailing with the peculiarities of the dialectical relationship of freedom and determinism. But the simple take, so far as I am concerned is that freedom is meaningful only in relation to determinism, and visa versa. So -- Free Will only exists in a context which in turn determines our degrees of freedom. Thus I am "free" to jump off a wall, if I choose to do so. I am not free to fly to a tall branch. My freedom is determined by the gravity rich context in which I live. And I would suggest that the same sort of thing is true with self-organization. If (as I think) self-organization is the prior (primal) condition of organizations, I am free to cooperate with it or seek to dominate it -- but I can't avoid it. Make sense?

julie smith, alaska, usa:

I'm not sure this matters, but I keep wondering whether the term "self-organization" is simply the equivalent of the term "free will" applied to groups. I keep wanting to state this in terms that rekindle memories of ages-ago math classes (might be Artur rubbing off on me :)). Something like this: Self-organization is to an organization as free will is to an individual. I can't quite get my mind around why this might be important. Perhaps it's that so much has been thought and said about free will. If self-organization and free will are analogous, then perhaps we could begin to recognize similar patterns on different scales. That would be very fractal-like, wouldn't it? That's what I keep thinking might be important somehow, but I don't suppose I'm right. :)

harrison owen, maryland, usa:

Interesting thought, if only because I think a lot of people might think of self-organization as the absolute antithesis of Free Will. The argument might go something like -- Since we are all part of self-organizing systems, of one sort or another, and since those systems are going to organize themselves regardless of what we do/will -- Free Will is just a fond delusion. I couldn't agree with that notion, and in fact I think it represents a profound mis-understanding of both Free Will and Self-Organization. As I am coming to understand it, Self-Organization is a fundamental principle in our existence, and it applies to both organizations and to us as individuals, just as gravity or the Laws of Thermodynamics. All these things are, to quote Birgitt, "Givens" which describe the context or boundaries within which our activities as individuals and organizations will take place.

We ignore these "givens" at out peril -- jumping off a cliff, and expecting to fly is not a career enhancing move. At the same time, we can learn to live with these "fundamentals" and (eventually) use them to our advantage -- and this is where the exercise of Free Will comes in, I think.

The Open Space Experience, for me, is an important and powerful educator in terms of our capacity to "live with and use" the principles (or maybe I could say Laws?) of Self-Organization. We learn, amongst other things, that the one way to close things down is to attempt to organize it (control). This can be a painful lesson, particularly to the old ego, which thought it was in charge. But there is good news as well, for it turns out that much of what we used to work very hard to accomplish will pretty well take care of itself, and we can go on to do some more useful things. Down the road, as we get better at it, I think we can learn to skillfully surf the waves of our collective self-organizations in order to achieve some pretty remarkable stuff. For me, this is where the excitement lies, and the learning curve is a steep one to be sure.

michael herman, chicago, usa:

julie, i think the linguistic equivalent to self-organizing on the level of 'bigger bodies' would map to what i've heard some talking about as 'self-actualization' for individual human bodies. both seem to be suggesting that we do in fact create our own realities and are responsible for our own state of mind, large and small.

...and while i never expected to fly, harrison, i have tried that stepping off a smallish cliff and it turned out to be quite the career-enhancing move, though other parts of me did suffer <grin>.... would say then that the journey is all about poking through these things we take as givens, our *apparent* reality.... into larger and larger *apparently* whole bodies/realities... we state them, start work within them and then knock through them as we push into the next larger circle with the next larger question... on our way to what some call the 'species' and others expand further to 'all sentient beings'.

bottom line is that once we come to accept that as orgs and individuals that we are responsible for our own state of mind/being, then we can get to work in that open space to see just what we can and can't control there, where does power and ease come from and what can it do? thanks to all for this one...

julie smith, alaska, usa:

Yesterday I came across this quote from Carl Jung: "The art of letting things happen, action through non-action, letting go of oneself, as taught by Meister Eckhart, became for me the key opening the door to the way. We must be able to let things happen in the psyche. For us, this actually is an art of which few people know anything. Consciousness is forever interfering...."

This seems to resonate well with what you are saying, Harrison. It seems to me that your thinking about things is also very similar to a style of mediation called Transformative Mediation. In most styles of mediation, the mediator is encouraged to let go of the content of the discussion, but in varying degrees to lead in (control) the process of how the discussion will unfold. In Transformative Mediation, the mediator is encouraged to follow rather than lead in both the content and process of the discussion. The role of the mediator practicing Transformative Mediation is to support empowerment of each individual and recognition of the relationship. In other words, to support each individual (empowerment) and to also support the relationship (recognition). With just this bit of presence, support and encouragement, many people who have been unable to resolve their differences find a way to do so.

Perhaps there is a continuum here...... how to be helpful with individuals experiencing internal conflict (psychology), how to be helpful with small groups experiencing external conflict (mediation), and how to be helpful with large groups experiencing external conflict/need for problem-solving (facilitation). Within each of these sets, we have many choices..... many ways of practicing psychology, mediation, and facilitation.

If we are interested in looking at choices that are infused with certain characteristics, like spirit, or letting go, or self-determination, or openness, or whatever it is we're trying to express, then we can look for how those values are being expressed at other places on the continuum, and then we have the opportunity to transfer knowledge across disciplines. Maybe we can consciously engage in the fractal dance.

Off to make stuffing I go. Happy Thanksgiving to those of you who are celebrating this holiday!

harrison owen, maryland, usa:

Julie -- the points you are making here are most important I think. For a long time it has been obvious that for the facilitator of Open Space, it is much more about "being" than "doing." Obviously there is not long training for the participants, and the opening remarks typically take 15-20 min. and things go from there -- The powers of rational cognition which are utilized in so many of our other activities take a clear second place to other powers which we all posses, but which many find weird, strange and uncomfortable. For me, the essential task is that of "creating and holding space," which can be effectively accomplished to the extent that we are "totally present and absolutely invisible." Obviously, nobody achieves "total presence and absolute invisibility", but that is a goal to be strived for. There are, of course, a number of ways that one might go about this, but for me my practice of meditation is central. When we move from the open space of an event to the ongoing open space of our lives, I think the same principles hold, and suddenly the esoteric (as we used to think about it) and the everyday shake hands. Not to bad.

judi richardson, nova scotia, canada:

Thank you for this line of thought, indeed it is a core one. Part of what I have been called to do over the last few years is a practice of mediation, as well as teaching at College and University

level. As I have never aspired to be a "talking head", facilitating learning in a classroom setting has been a delightful challenge. My view of mediation is co-creating a space where we can regain dignity in solving conflict. I know in both mediation and teaching that I've done my best when I hear someone say as I leave the room - what was she here for? You can imagine my delight in discovering Open Space Technology with Birgitt a few years ago. My classes are now conducted in Open Space, complete with circle and breakouts! In as Owen stated, "creating and holding space with total presence and total invisibility", and as Julie mentioned "letting go", I find the lines blurring between facilitating Open Space Technology meetings, mediation sessions, and facilitating learning in a classroom (indeed parenting!) ¯ I am becoming the same in each. This speaks directly to Julie's comments, "look for how those values are being expressed at other places on the continuum". Although I recognize there are many practices, as you mentioned as well Owen, my meditation practice deeply enhances my becoming a "being"..... Many thanks for reminding me of this in a busy day, Julie and Owen, and to Birgitt for her continued mentorship....

julie smith, alaska, usa:

Harrison, I find your statement "for a long time it has been obvious that for the facilitator of Open Space, it is much more about "being" than "doing,"" to be very refreshing. I think the mediation profession, as a whole, is less comfortable with that idea. Your statement may be somewhat less true for mediation because I assume (without really knowing) that mediation engages with people at a level of deeper interpersonal conflict than is engaged in most OST events. In many mediations, there are moments when "doing" something seems to be critical to keeping the conversation moving in a constructive way. Still, I think the mediation profession generally would benefit from taking a closer look at the quality of "being" that is inevitably linked to the quality of "doing." I also agree wholeheartedly that a meditation practice is a very useful way to attain a helpful state of being. (I love the lingual closeness of mediation and meditation..... though it can be tricky. I've found sometimes that people confuse mediation, meditation and medication!)

I would be interested in hearing from people who practice both OST and mediation to learn more about how OST concepts can enhance the mediation process.

Judi, please share more about how you use OST to facilitate learning in a classroom. I'm interested in whatever general insights and thoughts you and others might have. I'm also interested in these specific questions:

Do you define learning goals, or do the students define those goals?
How do you share your knowledge of the subject?
Is everything done OST-style, or do you use a mix of other processes?
Have you utilized this style of teaching with youth? If so, do you do anything differently with youth?

I've been looking for a way to incorporate my way of being as a mediator into my way of being as a co-learner/teacher for several years, and I very much look forward to learning more about how you've been able to do that. Your comment that "I know in both mediation and teaching that I've done my best when I hear someone say as I leave the room - what was she here for?" resonates

very deeply with me. I often tell new mediators that I know I'm doing my job well when it looks like I'm doing nothing at all, AND the participants are communicating in a constructive way. I've found it harder to accomplish that goal in my role as co-learner/teacher, so I will very much appreciate any insights you and others care to share on this subject.

harrison owen, maryland, usa:

At least in my practice, mediation in Open Space is just like anything else in Open Space -- It seems to happen all by itself. The people do it -- with no help required from me. I recognize that this observation may run somewhat counter to the prevailing theory and practice of some Mediators, but there it is. I would guess that there are situations where a more active role might be required, but I have never run into one. Even when the level of conflict is very high and the issues are old and deep. For example, in South Africa in the days shortly after Mandela's release from prison we did Open Spaces with such folks as Zulus, Hausa, Afrikaners -- all together, and no problem. I have often wondered why this is true, and my best guess is that The Law of Two Feet provides the needed "safety-valve" Folks come together because they want to solve some issues.

At the same time I think it to be true that nobody (save for a few pathological types) really like to blow their cool, so to speak. The desire to solve the issue brings them together, and the Law enables each individual to judge when they need a walk around the block to "cool off." I have seen this lots of time, and never seen it to fail.

OST and Meditation

glory ressler, ontario canada:

on invisibility and meditation...I've appreciated our recent conversation. This notion of invisibility is sometimes perplexing to me... For example, we just facilitated our second OST meeting for two recently amalgamated mental health agency branches of a national organization.

In meeting one, the amalgamation was imminent, the tension was palpable, and the theme was 'issues and opportunities around amalgamation'. We did receive a couple of 'why did we need the facilitator?' comments. This past week we facilitated a second meeting for them on 'developing the vision of _____'. The difference was remarkable! We had one attempted space invader (a mid-level manager who was previously an Executive Director of one of the branches!) which I handled swiftly and succinctly. The meeting was very productive, the mood much improved, and their ability and willingness to self-organize much smoother (less 'what do I do now?' questions). Again, we received three - 'wanted more from facilitator/we could have done it ourselves' comments. One participant knew intuitively that my work was to hold the space and commented to that effect. OST definitely works under a variety of conditions!!

During the meeting I felt centered and present. Afterwards, these comments have had a mildly haunting effect upon me. I guess my question is: Is there ever a time when 'facilitator not needed' means more than the appropriate 'fully present and fully invisible'?

BTW, in our summary to the org we suggested training staff so that they can conduct their own OST meetings in the future.

My favourite meditation has to do with arranging the circles of chairs - in the main and breakout rooms. Lift, place, adjust, bless the participant... Lift, place, adjust, bless the participant... (The maintenance staff love us for it - even if we only help a bit....).

Hope all of our American friends had a meaningful and heart-filled Thanksgiving!

harrison owen, maryland, usa:

re: arranging the chairs... Right on! Glory. And to add to that, I find it very useful to arrive in The Space early on, before anybody gets there -- and just sit in the middle in silence. I do get some strange looks from the hotel staff -- even caused the appearance of Security Folks. But it works for me. If I am working with a small group of "sponsors" I ask them to join me, and they usually do. Seems to get everybody centered, and then we move off to write signs, tear tape, shift chairs etc. -- all of which then seems more like a "collective walking meditation." No need to weird them out with explanations of the esoteric aspects of Open Space unless they ask -- which they do more often than not.

glory ressler, ontario canada:

Harrison and all, My associate Lynne and I both do the same... In fact, she usually beats me to the chairs! We also have a thing about making the space beautiful... beautiful principles and laws, matrix, etc.. We are also quite aware of how, and how not, we see and approach each person prior to a meeting. Can we find a way to see the beauty in each and to co-create the event together...? It just feels so right!!! We absolutely insist on early access to the room.... sometimes I even pre-walk the space - not a full opening, just a warm-up! Oh, the looks I get - to which I blithely say nothing :-) But then, you know I enjoy being mischievous... Plus, the ensuing questions, as you mentioned, are one of the few times I can indulge my penchant for the esoteric and existential.... I am a moving meditator and you've inspired me to stretch myself with your sitting approach... The 'collective walking meditation' is a beautiful metaphor. Thanks.

winston kinch, ontario, canada:

How? These "situations" not surprisingly receive little space here and I suspect they provide good opportunities for learning...

glory ressler, ontario canada:

winston (and other interested parties!),

Whilst opening the space, I was interrupted with the question, 'Will you be following up on Issues and Opportunities from the last OST meeting?'.

I moved toward that side of the circle (closer but not too close) and stated, 'Excellent question. No, I will not. You, and the identified champions and supporters from the last meeting, are invited to do so, however. I suggest you hang on until we move into convening topics from the floor and then, if you have the passion bounded by responsibility, do so. About passion and responsibility...' I carried on with the opening.

The question, I found out later, was also handled in discussion groups where the new ED and Board members committed to better follow-up. Part of our summary report suggested querying the champions and supporters, who self-identified previously, in order to find out what happened with follow-up and move into self-directed teams (which is one of the org goals).

If others have experiences, do share! I'd be interested in hearing how others have handled such.... Thanks for asking Winston!

john engle, haiti: I answer in a similar way to this frequently asked question.

harrison owen, maryland, usa:

> *During the meeting I felt centered and present. Afterwards, these comments have had a mildly haunting effect upon me. I guess my question is: Is there ever a time when 'facilitator not needed' means more than the appropriate 'fully present and fully invisible'?*

Frankly, I think it is the highest compliment you can receive. 'facilitator not needed' -- that is. The truth is -- you are not needed. the people are already "there" -- they just don't know it. So when they do (know it) say thanks and move on.

jeff aitken, san francisco, usa:

> *Joelle Lyons Everett wrote: My personal favorite practices when preparing for Open Space are mindful walking and making posters.*

A big Ah-mayn to that, Joelle. I'd like to write a collaborative article about the spiritual practice of tearing off dozens of small strips of masking tape and affixing them to the wall in little curly-cues next to the space-and-time matrix of post-its. Breathe, tear, stick, breathe, tear, stick...

michael m pannwitz, berlin, germany:

Dear Glory, I have been lifting, centering, arranging chairs in getting ready over and over again. A while back, I had to rush from one OS to the next and had no time to go through this exercise. The chairs were there, everything was in order, still, I felt not quite ready. From your report I fathom this must be one of my ways of meditating and I will attend to it with a new understanding... including the part "bless the participant" greetings from Berlin michael

PS: I do spend quite some time setting up other details, writing the principles anew for each open space, etc. When colleagues ask me how I get ready for the facilitation mode I tell them about all the detail I tend to usually remarking that this is the field in which I can control, decide, manage and control again till its all out of my system (well, some of it) but I have never seen the chair part as you have described. Thanks!

joelle lyons everett, washington, usa:

Glory, Jeff, Michael, Harrison and others-- I'm enjoying hearing how others center themselves for Open Space facilitation. I do find that tending to the physical details helps to bring me into the space and into the present moment. I like Jeff's and Michael's way of ritualizing the details. Thanks, Glory, for reminding me about blessing. When I have a participant list ahead of time, I take time the night before to meditate on it, and send blessings to each participant by name.

ralph copleman, new jersey, usa:

OS Diary ...the location was 900 miles from my home, I hadn't seen the space we'd be using ahead of time. I was as precise as I could be over the telephone and in writing in describing what was required. Nevertheless, when I arrived 45 minutes before I would be saying "Welcome to open space," they showed me into a huge auditorium with tiered flooring and a couple of hundred chairs and tables screwed permanently into the carpeted floor. There was a space about 12 feet wide down front. I said, "Nope" and started re-arranging the building lobby in a more appropriate configuration. (Note to file: didja ever notice how much unintended furniture moving you wind up doing as an OS facilitator??) The circle was kind of oblong, but it all worked out just fine.

Whatever happens, stay cool.

joelle lyons everett, washington, usa:

Ralph -- If you want to know who is in charge, just look to see who is moving furniture!

More Self-Organization

artur silva, portugal:

This thread is very interesting with many thought provoking posts. Thanks to all of you. I will came back to Harrison's first message (I have changed the numbers of the paragraphs - where K means Kauffman and H means Harrison):

> *Harrison Owen wrote: The formulation of Self-organization theory which I find to be most attractive is that proposed by Stuart Kauffman of the Santa Fe Institute, which he describes in his book, At Home in the Universe (Oxford). Simply stated, Kauffman argues that given certain quite simple pre-conditions "order happens." These pre-conditions include the following: K1) A relatively safe and protected, nutrient environment, K2) High levels of diversity in terms of the elements present in that environment.K3) High levels of complexity in terms of potential inter-connections. K4) A drive for improvement, or in more standard evolutionary terminology, a search for fitness. K5) Sparse prior connections in terms of the available elements (everything is not previous "hardwired." K6) The whole thing is on the edge of chaos. (...)*

> *I was immediately struck with the similarity between his pre-conditions and what for years I have described as the presenting circumstances for the use of Open Space. Which are: H1) A real business issue of great concern. H2) High levels of complexity in terms of the elements of the issue. H3) High Levels of diversity in terms of those involved. H4) The presence of actual or potential conflict. H5) A decision time of yesterday -- ie an urgent need for improvement. Even without going through a detailed comparison I think a more detailed comparison could be interesting...*

First let me remember that we are comparing: (K) The preconditions for order to happen (to emerge) out of chaos and (H) The (good) preconditions for the use of OST. So (H) does not describe the conditions that we generally have within normal (conventional) organizations but special conditions that Harrison stated as preconditions for a good use of OST. Our problem is how does the set {K1,...,K6} relates with {H1,...,H5}?

Clearly K2=H3 and K3=H2. I also suspect that H1+H4+H5 (+H2+H3?) are the conditions needed for an organization to be at the edge of chaos - so they are equivalent to (K6).

So, it seems that in (H) we have no equivalent to: K1) A relatively safe and protected, nutrient environment, K4) A drive for improvement, or in more standard evolutionary terminology, a search for fitness. K5) Sparse prior connections in terms of the available elements (everything is not previous "hardwired."
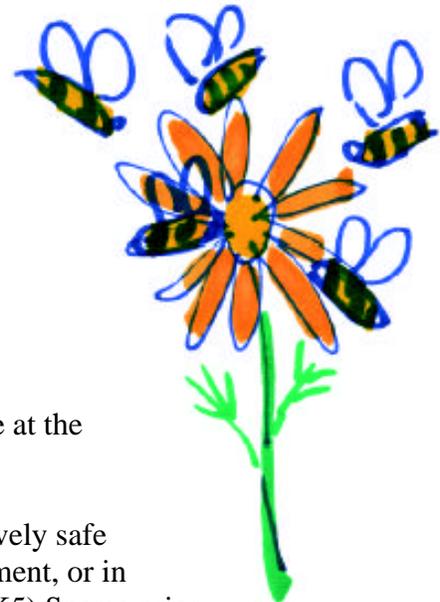
But I think that we all know that they also happen in OST. The point is that when Harrison stated (H)={H1,...,H5} he has not made explicit other things that are implicit in OST, namely:

(H6) - The Sponsor has accepted to adopt OST, has sent an invitation letter and some people have accepted (and others eventually not) the invitation. This (plus the rules of OST) creates the "safe and nutrient environment" (K1)

One could think that K4 is implied in {H1,...,H5} but I don't think so. Faced with conditions {H1,...,H5} an organization may decide to use "business as usual" or may decide to use OST. So H6 is also needed to create "a drive for improvement"(K4).

(H7) (or is it also H6?) - The sponsor and the people that accepted the invitation have accepted to SUSPEND the normal rules of conducting meetings and relating to each other replacing them by "OST rules" that "unwire" or at least diminish previous connections (K6).

I think you may be asking yourselves why I am stating all this. It is only a preface for what follows...

> *Harrison: So what good is all this in practical terms? First off, it provides an interesting way of looking at, and possibly answering, the nagging question (for me) of why Open Space works anyhow. I was trained to know that organization at the human level only occurred as the product of prodigious effort and great skill. It required brilliant design, execution and endless maintenance. What we experience in Open Space simply cannot happen. But of course it does. It appears that quite inadvertently I stumbled upon the essential pre-conditions of self-organization.*

I completely agree with what is written. But I know that my understanding of what is written is different from the understanding of the Author... I am sorry to came back to this disagreement about what is NOT written above... For that I will rephrase part of it...

"What we experience in Open Space simply cannot happen AND DOESN'T NORMALLY HAPPEN IN ESTABLISHED ORGANIZATIONS. But of course it does. It appears that quite inadvertently I (Harrison) stumbled upon the essential pre-conditions of self-organization - CONDITIONS THAT ARE NOT NORMALLY PRESENT IN CURRENT ORGANIZATIONS AND THAT OST HELPS TO CREATE (OR FACITATE?) IN THEM".

So my point is not that I don't believe that Harrison "stumbled upon" something important. My point is that it is much more important than he believes... Let's continue...

> *A related question for me has been why does Open Space work just about anywhere it has been tried, regardless of the education, ethnicity, economics, national origin, etc of the group? The answer would appear to be that the groups are "already there."*

No, the groups ARE NOT already there. The only thing that one can conclude from that is that any group has the potential to be there. But they don't normally behave in "Open Space mode" because they are constrained by other "social rules" that, even if they seem "invisible", are "out

there" and act as "laws" of organizational life - those laws are responsible for the fact that the majority of our organizations are unsafe and non-nutrient. OST suspends those laws and, for the period of its duration, creates new "laws" and "a relatively safe and protected, nutrient environment" (K1) - the first precondition for self organization according to Kauffman, quoted by you...

> *Harrison: There is nothing new to learn or do, although there may be much to unlearn and stop doing.*

Indeed, I think that to unlearn is un essential precondition for learning, and for me "to learn" and "to unlearn" are synonymous...

> *Harrison: One consequence of all this is that the notion of creating an Open Space Organization is a little absurd. It already is -- no creation necessary.*

Again, I don't think so. Like all meetings are not OST meetings, all organizations are not Open Space organizations. Like in OST someone must open and hold the space so must an OSO be nurtured. I will not continue to stress my point. But I would like to ask you a question that seems to me a contradiction in your argument, but I am probably wrong... Later in your post you wrote:

> *I suspect the same thing is true with the laws of self-organization and their local manifestation every time we open space.*

So, you wrote - as many of us did in other occasions - "every time we open space". But why is it that we need to "open the space". Shouldn't we say, according to your argument, that it is already open, and hence there is no need to open it?

larry peterson, ontario, canada:

I think that any "group" or organization is at many places at once. There are a diversity of worldviews (memes to use that worldview) and I think they are at a number of perceivable levels of "consciousness". There is also likely a dominant worldview or meme, dominant because it is largely accepted or dominate because it is imposed (by those who come from that perspective). That meme or worldview reinforces "social rules" and patterns of behaviour that develop because of job descriptions, formal structures, informal communication patterns - all the stuff that happens when people organize themselves out of a worldview.

Open Space gives the experience of opening up the group and the individuals in it to organize according to the principles and the law (and post-its and breakouts). That allows people to deal with the content of the conversations in ways that make sense to them, individually and "collectively". (I see people in OS discussion groups using the latest group process approaches that have gone through their organization, be that flip charts or solution focused therapy). It allows the reactive folks to react, the proactive folks to plan and the interactive folks to interact with each other or not. The principles and process transcend the current diversity and allow individuals and the collective "self" to organize as is chosen.

I agree that Open Space Technology is not the end. That the circle, the openness the principles stand in polarity with the emergent focus, direction, formal leadership that gives form and meaning to an organization. The many and the one are in a polarity that leads the spiral of consciousness to move.

Wow, was that esoteric and likely incomprehensible.   As to the nutrients, I think they are available, but some try to hoard them for awhile. Too much hoarding will eventually lead to the next crisis - a company may die. Too much blaming of the hoarders leads to actions that don't find where spirit is moving next.

joelle lyons everett, washington, usa:

Thanks, Artur, for your thoughtful contribution to this conversation. I agree with you that the acceptance of different rules for the duration of a meeting (or longer!) is an important element in the success of the OS conference. It may be that these rules lay out the natural condition of the world--but most of us have acquired a lot of habits of behavior which serve as obstacles. I believe that there are other "rule changes" which affect behavior in a bounded space such as a meeting, but OST is far and away my favorite!

fr brian bainbridge, melbourne, australia:

Dear Artur, It's a while since October 9 when you sent this material to the OSLIST, but I take a while to digest and think and then express my thoughts. I'll add my comments - for what they are worth - in the text of your questions below.

> *Artur F. Silva wrote: I am discussing in another list the problem of enhancing organizational learning, especially double loop learning and metanoia. I plan, in a near future, to present OST and discuss how it can improve double loop learning (or metanoia). In the last post to them I have presented Alberoni's conception of metanoia. I am asking for those of you who care about the subject to read that post and then answer, to the list or privately to me, to this questions, using always the meaning that Alberoni gives to "metanoia":*
>
> *1) From your experience with OST, do you think that OST is an important way to enhance metanoiaic states in organizations and communities?*

I do think OST is a way of enhancing, as you suggest and as Alberoni seems to be working at.

> *2) Do you think that some concepts current in the OST community may facilitate this? and others may make it difficult? What concepts?*

My own experience/thinking is that the concepts that are used - the 4 rules, the Law - do facilitate this very strongly. Again, from my experience, I haven't found any difficulty-making arising from these concepts.

> *3) Do you think that the OS community qualifies in itself as a "birth stage" (of a movement or of a Community of Practice, as Etienne Wenger defines CoP's)?*

Actually, I don't think this is so. Rather, as per Harrison, I sense that the hugeness of the impact of OST in a group/organization/community is that the "self-managing" is already alive and well in the system and has been suppressed, oppressed or ignored, and that OST simply allows the participants (even 2) to recognize, name, honour, and then enjoy and build on the sense or soul or spirit that such recognition uncovers and then encourages.

The stories I have from events I have been part of all involve "surprise" by participants that our ideas and sense are OK after all, that what we thought we knew - and weren't allowed to express - really matters, that we are now able to take forward these ideas and apply them the way we always knew should have been the case - but have never been allowed to do so. Hence the oppression of "modern management" and "systems" and "rules and regulations".

This is not to say that management/systems/rules have no place. They have. But their place is not that of utter control and "closed space" the way most people experience them.

So, rather than seeing OST qualifying as a "birth stage", I rather think of it as a discovery of reality, as perhaps a mature recognition of a state of existence which has co-existed with the "oppression systems", but which is now able to emerge and flourish.

That, if I understand the concept correctly, is different from metanoia, both as you describe it and as the theologians and scripture scholars I have studied (especially re St Paul) have described and understood it. Then again, I see it as a stage of development in human "civilization" rather than a real metanoia.

For some people, it happens rather as a shock to discover it. The Alberoni description of the process of falling in love can happen as a shock, I observe, but generally is a gradual and stepped development, mostly without any clarity about where it will end up until after it has happened and after it has come to some decision/conclusion.

> *4) If so, do you think that there is a risk that the community may disperse in different "sub-practices", and that can diminish the overall metanoiaic potential of OST?*

Metanoia or not, I do think there is a real risk and cost in the sort of "sub-practices" which do occur in the OST field. Like Harrison, (and unlike Birgitt Williams) I don't think we can do anything about that by way of certification or licensing for practitioners. But I do know of a number of examples where people have "done" Open Space and really come away with bad taste and bad vibes. In every case I know of, the person opening the space has really seemed to bastardize the process, using control mechanisms and not letting-go, using other interventions instead of disappearing or becoming invisible (the way Angeles Arrien reminds us), or simply

naming what they already do as "Open Space" and allowing a little more time for people to ask questions which the facilitator then sets out to address. I shudder especially when I see conference agenda which have programmed inputs followed by "Open Space time", which I know is a travesty of truth.

And yet. There are other examples where I know the facilitator has done some of this sort of thing and the program has worked out well - as one participant put it "In spite of the Facilitator".

And this always leads me back to the "Whatever happens is the only thing that could have" rule - reminding me that perhaps the organization/community/group was only able to go as far as they did, that it perhaps wasn't just the "fault" of the Facilitator, that in the longer-term scheme of things, we can often try to see meanings which are not yet ready to emerge and which, given the patience and "letting-go" so much needed in our world and time, may yet grow and happen. The real metanoia that can and perhaps does happen - but as shock, not development, as I have expressed above - is the perception by controller persons that there is another way which is better and which is easier and which can work with a whole lot less energy and controlling. And Open Space can do that. And the fear such people have built up over decades of experience is very hard to overcome or replace, generally. Hence they flop back into the control-and-command mode as soon as they can, whatever of the good intentions and initiatives that have been uncovered and fostered in the Open Space event.

Artur, some of the thinking that is in my mind.

It may not be connected at all, but I do observe that the great number of Open Space events in this country, and perhaps elsewhere, occur in the services industry sector of the community. Very few Open Space events seem to happen in business and strictly-for-profit or manufacturing organisations, I suspect. That may or may not impinge on the aspects of metanoia that you are working with in terms of where such changes can and do occur.

If that adds to your thinking at all, that's nice. In any case, it has been good to sit and explore the thoughts that you have stimulated for me.

Thanks. Cheers and blessings,   BRIAN.

meg salter, ontario, canada:

Most of my experience "using" OS has been in the private, for-profit sector. As expected, it works very well, and is often much less of a "hard convincing" job than I would have expected. Now this is not to say that the likes of big banks are turning into conscious open space organizations! But they are getting good experience in other ways of meeting/leading, and certainly recognize that there is NO TIME to deal with business in the usual way. The attraction is speed, flexibility, open flowing conversations, and a chance to "get real". And some may be beginning to learn when to plan and manage, and when to let go and open up to self-organization. ....food for thought.

artur silva, portugal:

Thank you very much for your comments, dear Brian. Indeed, when I came to the conclusion that for an ordinary organization to become a learning organization a profound paradigm shift or metanoia would be needed I was mainly thinking about companies and organizations of the public sector (like universities - mainly public in continental Europe - or services of the central administration). I was not thinking at all in NGO's or social service organizations. Thank you for calling my attention for the differences between those sectors.

florian fisher, berlin, germany:

please, would someone of you explain to me about the meaning of "metanoia"

artur silva, portugal:

Metanoia has a Greek origin and means "profound shift of mind" or paradigm shift. It was repeatedly used by Paul to refer to his own conversion. The word is used in English but is not included in Dictionaries :-(It has been largely used by the Italian sociologist Alberoni to refer to the birth phase of all civilizational movements (as well to the birth phase of love).

reinhard kuchenmueller, munich, germany:

In my little duden - German dictionary for words from foreign languages - it says (in my translation):   metanoia: inner turning back, penanceso I was wondering a bit about the connection with OS???

harrison owen, maryland, usa:

The problem, I think, lies not with "metanoia" -- which in Koine Greek (New Testament Greek) literally means " a turning around" -- a very major turn around -- as in transformation. When the New Testament was translated into English (and I am sure German) it came out "repentance." Which is probably correct, but limited. Anyhow the association works for me. And who knows -- Open Space may be good for Sin too.

ralph copleman, new jersey, usa

> *And who knows -- Open Space may be good for Sin too*

Now HERE"S a string I could really get interested in!
Ralph Copleman -- Archdeacon, Church of What's Happening Now

Open Space and Other Methods

joelle lyons everett, washington, usa:

> *Artur Silva wrote: The difference between the rules of other methods and the ones of OST is that the former are still too "structured" to allow for Kauffman's conditions of self organization, I think...*

I would agree with you on that, Artur. And I have also been intrigued for a long time about the degree of behavior change which often happens when the rules are changed a bit. But I would agree that it is within a structured system which constrains the full operation of self organization. Re: Winnie-the-Pooh, although my youngest child is now 27 and a father himself, Paul and I still find ourselves quoting Winnie-the-Pooh. Paul used to read it aloud to our sons--when he read to the youngest, it was amazing what the older ones, some of them teenagers, found to do within hearing range of the story. Hope all is well in your world.

michael m pannwitz, berlin, germany:

Hi there Joelle and Artur... what rules? greetings from a baltic weekend retreat

harrison owen, maryland, usa:

I'm with you Michael. What Rules? We ain't got no rules -- just 4 principles (which merely describe what folks are going to do anyhow) and one Law -- which is really a commandment to go out there and Self-Organize. Just keep those feet moving!!!!

j. paul everett, washington, usa:

Michael, Artur; Here is a real life example of what can happen when the "rules" are changed. A client of mine had a paper machine that had been idle for two years. There came an opportunity to re-start the machine, create some more good jobs, and make some money. The management plan was for the 'standard process', estimated to take 5 months.

One of the discoveries about becoming a world class performer that we made in the 80's was the concept of the "Outrageous Goal"---defined as a clearly unreachable goal under current "rules" (paradigms). Therefore, to make the goal, one has to shatter the current paradigm (rules) and re-think the whole effort. I have dozens of examples of this working for most who try it.

In this case, one of the engineers suggested "Why don't we listen to what Paul has been showing us and set an Outrageous Goal?" After the laughter had died down, he kept it on the table and when they challenged him, he said "How about two weeks?" (Instead of five months). When the

now-nervous laughter had died down again, they started to think what it might mean to do so. Market capture was a big one. So, they altered the "rules" about how the project would be done.

In the case of maintenance and engineering, they said: You can work on what you want, when you want, as long as you want (minimum of 10 hours off the job), with who you want. The only requirement is absolute safety at all times (this company has the best safety record in the industry) and to come in and check off the steps on the PERT chart. Result: In 15 calendar days, they ran test paper, and ran good paper on day 17. Over 100 people were on the floor cheering as the good paper came off the machine onto the roll. (Is that a self-organization statement or what??)

The value was over $2.5 million in additional sales during the remaining "5-month planned start-up period" and a presence in the market before anyone else could get there. The head of quality accompanied the first roll of paper to the customer and the customer ran up and hugged him!! "First time in 30 years of working I've been hugged by a customer" said the QC super.

This is an example of how altering the "rules", which I see as paradigms about how we think and do things around here, can have dramatic results.


artur silva, portugal:

Hello Michael: Speaking for myself, when I wrote that I was comparing OST "rules" with the "rules" of other "large group intervention methods", namely "Future Search" and "Real Time Strategic Change".

By "rules" of OST I mean: "the way OST works", or the "foundations of OST", the circle, breath, theme, bulletin board, market place and the law of two feet.

By rules of the other methods, I was thinking about the procedures used as they are described by Jacobs (RTSC), Weisbord and Janoff (FS), or generally by Bunker and Alban for those and other methods.

In all those methods, except OST, there is an Agenda pre-defined and the tasks to do and methods to use in each point are defined by the facilitator, which also closelly guides participantes in all the phases and procedures. Because of that, those methods are the contrary of letting go from the facilitator and empowering the participantes - hence, imo, they are the contrary of self-organization....
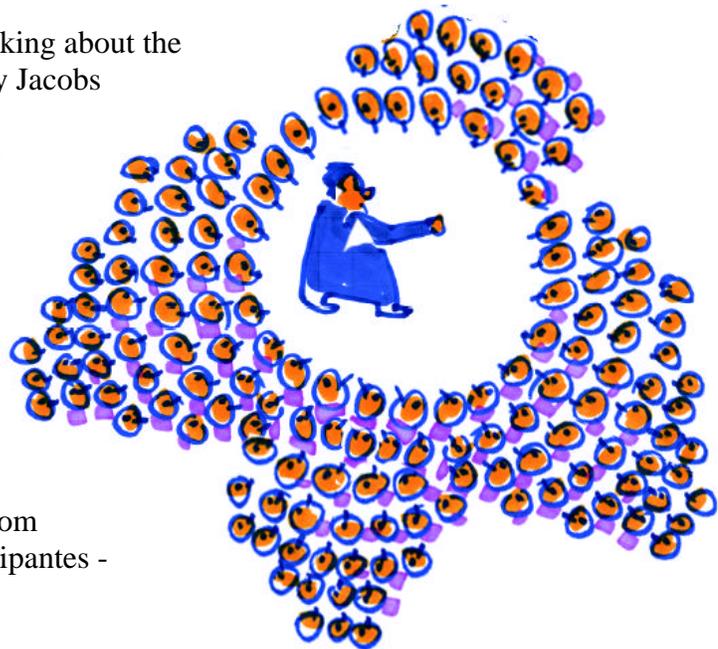
ralph copleman, new jersey, usa:

Well, maybe.   I work with both FS and OS, and offer these thoughts...

1. To describe what happens in future search as closely guided by the facilitator misses the point of the design. Yes, there's a pre-set structure, but all the conversations that occur in smaller groups are, in my view, highly self-organized. As for the large group discussions, they're directed by the facilitator almost completely, to just about the same extent as the opening and closing of OS often are.

2. On another plane, I'm for any method that breaks down the conventional boundaries and mind-frames, on one hand, and shows people how to cooperate on the other. I worry less and less about how what I do conforms to conceptual principles and more about how well it helps the world transform.

Both OS and FS open the doors I want to help people go through.

peggy holman, washington, usa:

Here! Here! After looking closely at 18 approaches to changing human systems for The Change Handbook, my own conclusion is similar to Ralph's. What I have come to believe is that the choice of approach has more to do with chemistry among practitioner, method and client than anything else. They all have the potential to transform. Further, I've concluded the choice of process has much to do with the beliefs of the practitioner. Many different choices can work in a given situation. I believe the amount of structure required is a reflection of the beliefs of the practitioner doing the work. When there is a perception that people need to be led, then they will prove that out. If the perception is that participants will figure things out for themselves, they somehow do. So, how much "help" you think people need will guide how much help they turn out to need. Peggy

john engle, haiti:

peggy, thank you for taking the time to share your views on this. they (your views) are extremely helpful to me and i am about to paste your words into a document that i share with others. assuming this is all right with you.

artur silva, portugal:

I could not understand, Peggy, if all the 18 have the potencial to be useful to create good meetings or if they have the potencial to profoundly transform the organizations where they have been applied.

If it were the second hypothesis that you stated, I would like to know if you are telling your opinion or if you have researched (action research?) enough cases of companies that applied those methods to conclude that.

The point is that my information until now went in a different direction. For instance, see the interview with Peter Senge to Fast Company in 1999 in http://www.fastcompany.com/online/24/senge.html.

The 1st question was "What's your assessment of the performance of large-scale change efforts over the past decade?"

Senge answered (in part):

"My own experience at MIT and at the Society of Learning (Sol) has mostly been with big companies. How much change have they actually accomplished? If I stand back a considerable distance and ask, 'What's the score'" I have to conclude that inertia is winning by a large margin. Of course, there have been enough exceptions to that conclusion to indicate that change is possible. I can identify 20 to 30 examples of significant sustained change efforts in the SoL community. On the other side of the ledger, there are many organizations that haven't gotten to first base when it comes to real change and many others that have given up trying. When I look at efforts to create change in big companies over the past 10 years, I have to say that there's enough evidence of success to say that change is possible and enough evidence of failure to say that it isn't likely. Both of those lessons are important."

So it seams that change is not easy and probably not all methods are equal. By the way this was an interview after the publication of "The Dance of Change" where some methods and disciplines were not so empathized as in the past and some new ones were referred - like the concept of Communities of Practice and the OST methodology ;-)

peggy holman, washington, usa:

Artur, Thanks for the furthering this discussion. I believe all 18 methods have the potential to create good meetings and to profoundly transform. I do know of example of profound change for each of the 18 methods that I looked at. I would not consider it enough to say that I have empirical evidence for my statement to be more than an opinion. And I would heartily agree with your quote from Peter Senge that "...there's enough evidence of success to say that change is possible and enough evidence of failure to say that it isn't likely." I wouldn't say that all methods are equal, just that profound change is possible with all of them. In other words, there are factors beyond method that are likely to make the difference. My belief (and I don't have sufficient empirical evidence for it to be more than an opinion) is that while method may be one factor in success or failure the beliefs of the facilitator are an even greater factor.

I seem to recall that you have an information systems background, as do I. In the early days, were you ever in discussions about which programing language is best for a given task? Often, the

conclusion we'd reach is that it is possible to program anything in any language. While some languages are more conducive to particular tasks than others, in the hands of a skilled programmer, it is possible to make anything work.

I think it is the same with methods. The core beliefs of the facilitator influence their actions and the unspoken cues they send. Are there methods that are better fits in different circumstances? You bet. And yet, I can take the similar circumstances and put different facilitators in them using the same method and get results with widely differing impact. Further, I believe I could take the same facilitator, use different methods and get similar results. I don't have empirical evidence for this. It is an opinion reached by observation of, discussion with, and reading of comments from a variety of people using a variety of methods. I think what started me down this path was the deep conviction of virtually every expert that their way was the most effective. One thing they all had in common was an expectation that what they were doing worked and worked profoundly. Additionally, there was the evidence of talking with people using these same methods in similar circumstances and getting much less powerful results. What was different? I think this is fertile ground for research.

My untested theory is the factors involved in success include sponsor beliefs (particularly around their passion for and audaciousness of the desired future, sense of invitation to particpate, generosity of spirit), facilitator beliefs (particularly around people's capacity to act wisely for the good of the whole as well as themselves), and method. I'd love to hear other perspectives on this.

By the way, the reason Open Space is so core to my own practice is it makes it so visible that people have the capacity to create what they want. I have seen other methods get people there but there's something so elegant in OS's simplicity in enabling people to live this experience. And at a practical level, there's something that Harrison mentions a lot. If I can accomplish the same thing with a lot less work, doesn't that make sense to do?

artur silva, portugal:

Thank you very much for your further explanations, Peggy. I think I will need some time to reflect and try to digest the information. In the meanwhile I have one more question and some comments to further the dialogue.

> *Peggy Holman wrote: I seem to recall that you have an information systems background, as do I. In the early days, were you ever in discussions about which programming language is best for a given task? Often, the conclusion we'd reach is that it is possible to program anything in any language. While some languages are more conducive to particular tasks than others, in the hands of a skilled programmer, it is possible to make anything work. I think it is the same with methods.*

Yes I do and I understand your point - one can use different programming languages with success. But I am note sure if the same is true of using different programming methods (say "spaghetti programming" versus structured programming versus object oriented programming). So I would expect methods to be one of the factors or success - not the only one of course, but one of them.

> *And yet, I can take the similar circumstances and put different facilitators in them using the same method and get results with widely differing impact. Further, I believe I could take the same facilitator, use different methods and get similar results.*

Sorry, I can't understand the last sentence - similar to the previous sentence (different impacts) or similar impacts?

peggy holman, washington, usa:

I am offering 2 variations:

1. The same situation, the same method, handled by facilitators with different beliefs will lead to different results. The point being that the different beliefs have a strong impact.

2. The same situation, different method, same facilitator will lead to similar results. In other words, the beliefs of the facilitator have the greater impact, no matter the method.

artur silva, portugal:

> *peggy wrote: I don't have empirical evidence for this. It is an opinion reached by observation of, discussion with, and reading of comments from a variety of people using a variety of methods. I think what started me down this path was the deep conviction of virtually every expert that their way was the most effective. One thing they all had in common was an expectation that what they were doing worked and worked profoundly. Additionally, there was the evidence of talking with people using these same methods in similar circumstances and getting much less powerful results. What was different? I think this is fertile ground for research.*

Have you obtained your information mainly from the change agents or have you checked that out with the people of the "changed organization"? The problem is that the facilitator (and even the sponsor) can be biased - for a matter of research it would be interesting to talk with people at various levels of the organizations that were subjected to change. (By the way I don't like to use the expression I have used "organizations subjected to change" as they must always be "agents" and not only "subjects" for any profound change to take place).

> *My untested theory is the factors involved in success include sponsor beliefs (particularly around their passion for and audaciousness of the desired future, sense of invitation to participate, generosity of spirit), facilitator beliefs (particularly around people's capacity to act wisely for the good of the whole as well as themselves), and method. I'd love to hear other perspectives on this.*

I tend to agree with you. What confused me at first was the fact that all 18 methods could be equally effective.

By the way, the reason Open Space is so core to my own practice is it makes it so visible that people have the capacity to create what they want. I have seen other methods get people there but there's something so elegant in OS's simplicity in enabling people to live this experience. And at a practical level, there's something that Harrison mentions a lot. If I can accomplish the same thing with a lot less work, doesn't that make sense to do?

I agree with the elegance. But I think the point is not only elegance. If Harrison's statement that "less is more" is true than I tend to think that "more is less" is also true. So I have doubts about methods where the facilitator "facilitates too much" as they tend to disempower people (except the facilitator himself).

Further I tend to agree with Lewin that to change an organization first the old rules and procedures must be unfrozen. And I think OST is more apt to unfreeze previous rules and procedures that some other methods that are more "directive".

peggy holman, washington, usa:

I agree with your point about directiveness. In a funny way, it led to my conclusion about the power of the facilitator's beliefs. I discovered an interesting irony when working with the different contributors to my book. I kept asking questions about where the power was. 100% saw power increasingly belonging to participants. Even those that I perceived to be the most directive saw themselves as letting go of power and creating greater openness. When I started exploring this, I realized how much it has to do with their current knowledge base. To state this in an extreme way, if all I know is dictatorship and someone invites me to offer an opinion, that creates more freedom. If I've never seen even greater freedom (like an OS), just asking is a breakthrough. So, by my standards, with Open Space as a context, just inviting an opinion is quite directive. To those experiencing this new freedom for the first time, it is a great innovation and can transform.

The Spirit of Letting Go

michael molenaar, tilburg, holland:

OK, I think this is really interesting! I followed the discussion of self organization, and I felt something was missing. I would like to make a point about my opinion of the essence of Open Space: Some might think it's self organization that invokes some human processes like motivation and community. I think that's not really true, it's the experience of Spirit.

It is argumented that you can choose and pick one of the 18 approaches, on which Peggy wrote the highly interesting Change handbook, according to the chemistry which leads facilitators and clients into each others arms.

I have this book, and must admit that I didn't really experience all those approaches, except for two and one isn't in the book. (Open Space and Organization Constellation, a new approach by Bert Hellinger in Germany, Holland and some other countries). Both these two "technologies" are originally based on ancient ways of working with human problem solving (to put it simply) on which we in Modern (Newtonian, scientific) thinking lost a little bit of track. (Sorry if this isn't correct English, but I'm Dutch).

In essence I know of these two technologies that they only really work if a (communication) canal is opened in which you come into contact with another layer of the organization and this is based on shamanistic principles. (i.e.: Looking at one form: the Circle). Bert Hellinger calls it: "systemic" Harrison Owen writes a lot about "Spirit" and that is really important because the way we are used to work in organizations our thinking is based the usual senses without the communication canal on which Spirit is based. (and somehow we know it because we're not really satisfied when we miss the Spirit and don't know what to do about it)

However, you sure can do an Open Space "rationally". You just be happy and don't worry and experience some sort of "self organization" and following the principles and the one law, which is really a joy to do! At first I wondered why Harrison seems so relaxed about it (and wrote a "users guide" as if it were a set of software rules). But now I see that there is somehow a two sided world of Open Space. And so is Harrison to me: At first glance he is really very relaxed about this and that, but at some point he becomes very precise and gets in the discussion strong as a thick wall. That's the point where it not easy to discuss based on "book knowledge" or mind anymore, but you have to talk based on real, pure experience in combination with the knowledge how Open Space really works. This is a phenomenological approach, and that's also the importance of the Story telling thing. And then the problem with "rules" becomes clear. And the one law, of course, isn't really a law, but more a strong advise (put in a funny way) to follow your feet. (Oops, is this a curse in Open Space church?)

There are two sides of Open Space, as I see it: The first side is the easy understandable and funny part, which makes it so attractive and, YES!, invites almost everyone to go for it. In this it is not really special and Open Space has to compete with the other 17 methods of the Change Handbook. But if you started to talk about the Shamanistic principles on which Open Space is

based there would be a problem. So of course you usually don't start with this part of the story (at least I don't when I talk to someone who might be interested). On the second side is the essence (like Birgitt calls this) in which Open Space can have a very deep effect on how people work together: they make their Action Planning to a success, because they have discovered that they are connected on a deeper level in the organization and that the essence is not about hierarchy, but about Spirit and that it is really easy to open this special communication canal to do so. Is it that easy?? Yes and no. No if you do the first side Open Space, but the excitement of the experience will fade out...

The principles of the contact with Spirit is the same as it happens in (family &) Organization Constellations. Bert Hellinger (who was also a Priest with also a lot of world experience and also found out that a circle is a fundamental ancient communication form to work in) calls this communication layer "systemic". He goes some steps beyond Open Space, and he directly refers to "movements of the soul". No wonder in this case it is not easy to find the way in Organizations!

Now I'm stopping, because this is getting to far for the moment, I'm writing an article on comparing Open Space and Organization Constellation but it's not ready yet.

I'm looking forward to your reactions,

harrison owen, maryland, usa:

Why does this have to be an either/or -- why not both/and? The whole point about Open Space as Self-Organization for me is that we (humanoids) like (apparently) all the rest of the cosmos are rooted in fundamental processes which (to some extent) determine our behaviors and range of responses. That is not all there is -- but is a start. Our growing understanding of the phenomenon of self-organization allows for a rational explanation of what otherwise might be inexplicable -- Why does open Space work??? Is this true -- in some absolute and abstract fashion? Who knows, but it seems to work (logically) and more importantly for those who use Open Space, it provides a deeper awareness of the realm we are operating in, and simultaneously explains some seemingly anomalous happenings -- such as -- the more we seek to control what goes on, the less successful we are.

But not to stop here. For a deeper understanding of Open Space and our experience in Open Space, I find it useful to consider the realm of Spirit. The phenomenon of self-organization is only a partial explanation. Before all that is Spirit, or what classically would be called Consciousness. To deeply understand Open Space and our experience therein -- we in fact have to go deeper. Actually (to let the cat out of the bag) I started with Spirit and only later, and quite by accident, ran into Open Space. My first book, which was written in 1982-3, and published in 1987 -- was all about Spirit. The words "Open Space" do appear, but have nothing to do with what we now call Open Space Technology. The reference is to what the Buddhists might call The Abyss, or The Void. How I got from Open Space as "void" to an approach to meetings, may seem a little strained, but my reason was that much of what I experienced in The Void I also found whenever space was opened.

All of which poses an interesting question -- Does everybody have to go into The Void in order to experience/understand Open Space? I guess the answer is Yes and No -- it is all about levels. It is quite possible to just "do" Open Space. No explanation needed or wanted. Or you could dig a little deeper into the question -- Why the Hell does the damn stuff work -- when everything (well almost) in our training and experience says that it couldn't and shouldn't? And I think some sort of an answer starts to emerge when we open up the discussion to include Self-Organizing systems. But is that all there is? to which I must answer, No we are just getting started -- and it is off to The Void. Is there anything else? Probably. It might just be pure nothingness... Now try that for a sales pitch in the The Corporate Board Room!

> *There are two sides of Open Space, as I see it: The first side is the easy understandable and funny part, which makes it so attractive and, YES!, invites almost everyone to go for it. In this it is not really special and Open Space has to compete with the other 17 methods of the Change Handbook. But if you started to talk about the Shamanistic principles on which Open Space is based there would be a problem. So of course you usually don't start with this part of the story (at least I don't when I talk to someone who might be interested). On the second side is the essence (like Birgitt calls this) in which Open Space can have a very deep effect on how people work together: they make their Action Planning to a success, because they have discovered that they are connected on a deeper level in the organization and that the essence is not about hierarchy, but about Spirit and that it is really easy to open this special communication canal to do so. Is it that easy?? Yes and no. No if you do the first side Open Space, but the excitement of the experience will fade out...*

Absolutely! Which is why it has always seemed to me that anybody with a good head and a good heart can "do" Open Space, but it probably takes a life time to get to the bottom of things.

> *Now I'm stopping, because this is getting to far for the moment, I'm writing an article on comparing Open Space and Organization Constellation but it's not ready yet.*

I will look forward to seeing it.

toni petrinovich, washington, usa:

And wishing to throw my two cents in: And when we realize that it may not be about understanding how it all works as much as allowing it to be what works and to be what we are/are doing, we may find that the Void supports All That Is and, also, all that is - that is what we find in Open Space - an opening to the time/space continuum that allows for all.

michael molenaar, tilburg, holland:

> *Harrison wrote: All of which poses an interesting question -- Does everybody have to go into The Void in order to experience/understand Open Space? I guess the answer is Yes and No -- it is all about levels. It is quite possible to just "do" Open Space. No explanation*

needed or wanted. Or you could dig a little deeper into the question -- Why the Hell does the damn stuff work -- when everything (well almost) in our training and experience says that it couldn't and shouldn't? And I think some sort of an answer starts to emerge when we open up the discussion to include Self-Organizing systems. But is that all there is? to which I must answer, No we are just getting started -- and it is off to The Void. Is there anything else? Probably. It might just be pure nothingness... Now try that for a sales pitch in the The Corporate Board Room!

The levels, yes. This is one of the things I'm trying to get in the attention. Not as an explanation or a way for convincing, but that there is some powerful essence that can be discovered keeping in mind what a real Open Space is: to respect the Space of the others and to leave it up to their choice what level they would like to go in to.

The notion of levels is useful to me (In my text I used two sides of Open Space, but "levels" feels as a better word). And important to learn that it's a good thing to keep all levels open and not to interfere with someone's choice. (Not to interfere is not that easy, as we all know).

Still, like the way of the invitation before an Open Space meeting, I think that it is useful to have a notion of "levels" and that it is possible to invite also to the other level, maybe just by the way the facilitator is present.

In a family or organization constellation the level of the communication canal to what is called "systemic energy" (I can't explain this word for now, it is something like the flow which deeply leads and connects us in our life) has to be opened. There is no choice here: As a participant you don't have to be experienced, but connecting to this level is needed for this work. But here explanation in words is the same as to explain what Open Space is: just experience it and you know what it is.

>   *Harrison: I will look forward to seeing [your article].*

This invitation will stimulate me to write it, first in Dutch and then in English, it is in my heart, and will definitely come out. I got the idea the first time when I did the training of Birgitt in Holland in may this year, but just now is the time to finish it.

Beside my article I would really recommend to read or if possible: experience, something about the constellation work of Bert Hellinger. He is a German, but has done a lot of constellations in English and there are also videos available in English, however the most of them are about family constellations. Organization Constellations is still a very young field. Books in English are: "Love's hidden symmetry" (ISBN 1-891944-00-2) and "Acknowledging what is" (ISBN 1-891944-32-0) His website is: http://www.hellinger.com

julie smith, alaska, usa:

>   *Michael wrote: The levels, yes. This is one of the things I'm trying to get in the attention. Not as an explanation or a way for convincing, but that there is some powerful essence*

that can be discovered keeping in mind what a real Open Space is: to respect the Space of the others and to leave it up to their choice what level they would like to go in to.

This conversation reminds me of some things I've read recently about and by Meister Eckhart, a 14th century theologian. Eckhart talked about letting go and letting be as an essential aspect of spirituality. Eckhart's description of letting go and letting be, as well as his linking of that choice with spirituality, seems to parallel some of the conversation here. Here are a few excerpts:

"Eckhart invented the words for letting go and letting be. The two words are Abgeschiedenheit and Gelassenheit respectively…."

Abgeschiedenheit evokes a mind that is on the way to dispossession from all exteriority which might spoil its serenity.

Gelassenheit comes from the word lassen, to let go, to relinquish or abandon. It also means to allow or permit. It suggests openness and receptivity. "It means, says Eckhart, to be 'receptive of all spirit.'"

"Thus what letting go does is to develop sensitivity and openness to the spirit and this receptivity results in letting be…. Letting be is an act of respecting the autonomy of all things. 'It designates the attitude of a human who no longer regards objects and events according to their usefulness, but who accepts them in their autonomy.' Thus a good synonym for letting be might be reverence. Letting be is an attitude of reverence for all things that allows them to be themselves and God's selves. This represents one more reason why the path of letting go and letting be is not one of putting down anything or any event. It is rather to enter so fully into events and things that we reverence all that is there. This reverence is a gentle letting be. 'What is being spoken of here is to meet with gentleness, in true humility and selflessness, everything which comes your way.'"

"Letting oneself be oneself and letting others be themselves."

"One cannot learn this [to perceive God in all things] by flight, by fleeing from things, and from externality to solitude, but one must learn to cultivate an inward solitude, wherever or with whomsoever one may be. One must learn to break through things and to grasp one's God in them and to be able to picture him powerfully to oneself in an essential manner."

"The letting go Eckhart advocates…. is a letting go of the I in order to let the We happen."

harrison owen, maryland, usa:

Nicely put, Julie.
Occasionally I am asked prior to a training

program (or even during) -- If Open Space is so simple, why do we have to spend several days working on it? My answer, which may be a little bit flip, goes something like, "Well, there a few details to be considered, but mostly it is about learning to let go. And that seems to take a lot of time for most of us. The harder we try, the behinder we get."

glory ressler, ontario, canada:

Hi all! Julie's post on Meister Eckhart's 'letting go' and 'letting be' reminded me of a little story that helps me to remember to live that way... :-) It came to me from Amy and Arny Mindell's site http://www.aamindell.net and is entitled:

How to Build a Taoist Temple

Once upon a time there were four Taoists who had nothing much to do. Each lived in a different part of town. Without the ability to call one another and talk about things on the phone, they had to depend upon something else. In fact, that was their whole job "to follow that "something else". Most people thought these four were very funny or else very weird. No one could ever tell why those four did what they did. Even the Taoists themselves did not know!

Anyway, one day something got in their heads at about the same time. Each thought to herself, "Why not build a temple?" Quite spontaneously they all decided to leave their homes and begin walking through the streets of the town, not knowing the others were doing the same!

While meandering through the city, one of them suddenly stopped abruptly because of a raging fight on a street corner. She always thought weird things, and this time was no different. She thought to herself, "What a great place for a temple", and immediately began collecting rocks from the gutter, twigs and beer cans from the street, and dirt and broken glass from the sidewalk. She used them all to make the most sacred place, muttering all the while to herself as she worked, "Just building, doing nothing much".

Just as she settled into her work, the people who were fighting turned away from each other, and--- barely looking at her - screamed with all their might, "You good for nothing!" and promptly continued their fighting. They threw rocks at one another, and some at hurt her as well. She caught these rocks and joyously said mainly to herself, "thank you, thank you!" and added them to her structure which was growing rapidly. Just then, a dog came by and urinated in the gutter. She held out a broken cup and said again, "thank you, thank you" and mixed it with the dirt to form mortar.

A kind of stucco-like building began to emerge from her work. It became so large that she could not see the conflict anymore. Nevertheless, she could hear their voices yelling on the other side of the wall. One of them was screaming at the other, "You never take my side! In fact, you insult me. You good for nothing & I hate you!"

As soon as she heard this, the Taoist muttered to herself, "Thank you, thank you", repeating each of their words ever so slowly, treasuring some awesome presence she sensed behind each

syllable. "Thank you, thank you", she muttered. "This is the energy I need to build my temple. I was otherwise so tired today".

Finally, the structure was almost complete. She felt well within its walls, but knew she had to leave because she was all alone inside. As she got to the door, she could not see but heard the screaming begin once again! Without a moment's hesitation, she joined noise and screamed at the top of her voice as well. She yelled, "We never met before, who the hell are you?" Now the screaming of the others abated as they came around the corner and looked in the doorway. To her surprise, she heard them say "Well, how do you do? We know each other!" And she recognized the three other Taoist priests!

That is how four Taoist priests built a temple. Three had a conflict and the other one loved it!

julie smith, alaska, usa:

As I read your thoughts this morning I was reminded of something you said a few days ago:

> *Harrison: All of which poses an interesting question -- Does everybody have to go into The Void in order to experience/understand Open Space?*

Matthew Fox is the translator and commentator of the book on Eckhart I've been reading. According to Fox, Eckhart's theology is based on a four-part spiritual path. To the best of my understanding, it goes something like this:

1. Celebration of Creation (via positiva)
2. Letting Go and Letting Be (via negativa)
3. Birthing (spiritual birth)
4. _____ and Social Justice (I don't recall the full name of this path, and I don't have the book with me)

Your description of letting go and letting be as The Void is consistent with Eckhart's description. It is the empty receptive side of spirituality. In this way of thinking, perhaps Open Space could be understood to be one way of expressing the essential spiritual learning of emptiness.

julie smith, alaska, usa:

My last summary of Eckhart's path wasn't quite accurate. Here is Matthew Fox' outline of the "spiral of expanding consciousness" of the "fourfold path in Meister Eckhart's journey."

1. Creation
2. Letting Go and Letting Be
3. Breakthrough and Giving Birth to Self and God
4. The New Creation: Compassion and Social Justice

Another aspect of Eckhart's thinking that parallels many of the conversations here is his rejection of dualistic thinking.

eric lilius, ontario, canada:

Harrison's remark..."The harder we try, the behinder we get" brought to mind the Sutra of the Third Zen Partiarch

The Hsin Hsin Ming   --verses on the faith mind

I am constantly reflecting on the first two lines of this great treasure of wisdom.

"The Great Way is not difficult for those who have no preferences."

Simple.....but....

I believe this text speaks to the essence of Open Space. A copy of this translation in its entirety can be found at http://www.spiritwalk.org/hsinhsinming.htm#Hsin Hsin Ming

The Great Way is not difficult for those who have no preferences. When love and hate are both absent everything becomes clear and undisguised. Make the smallest distinction, however, and heaven and earth are set infinitely apart.

If you wish to see the truth Then hold no opinions for or against anything. To set up what you like against what you dislike is the disease of the mind. When the deep meaning of things is not understood, the mind's essential peace is disturbed to no avail.

The Way is perfect like vast space where nothing is lacking and nothing in excess. Indeed, it is due to our choosing to accept or reject that we do not see the true nature of things.

Live neither in the entanglements of outer things, nor in inner feelings of emptiness. Be serene in the oneness of things and such erroneous views will disappear by themselves.

When you try to stop activity by passivity your very effort fills you with activity. As long as you remain in one extreme or the other you will never know Oneness. (continued...)

The Meaning of Storytelling

michael molenaar, tilburg, holland:

Some days ago there was a discussion about the difference between OST and other large scale intervention methods (what are we doing anyway by labeling it with the term "large scale"?). It seems to me, that the discussions on this OST forum gives me more than "just discussions". maybe it gives a clue what is meant by "storytelling". Anyway, what I am really interested in, is: why doing the story telling. I know it is a hobby of Harrison and I think I could spend a lot of evenings listening to him telling stories, but in my opinion it's not that only. Maybe it has to do with language, because the word "stories" in Dutch means nothing special; it can also mean "gossip" or thing like that. Birgitt makes a strong point that storytelling is very necessary, so even prescribed, when you do OST on something that has to be done in the future. What I have understood, storytelling is basic in those cases to "get your feet first on the ground" (these are my own words). So I think that with "Story Telling" is meant the stories you are likely to tell around the campfire. Then, to me, it's something more than just stories, because there is fire and there are stars above us which remind us how big and small we are at the same time. So at the campfire there is a communication at another level then just "stories". Can some of you give me some experiencies of story telling? Does it go wrong when the client doesn't want to do story telling? Has someone ever refused to do an OST because of the absense of storytelling? Any ideas what is happening on communication levels when story telling takes place? Greetings, especially for Birgitt now on her tour trying to become an American citizen. (does George Bush know she is coming?)

ralph copleman, new jersey, usa:

I've lost count of how many successful open space events I've attended and facilitated. And I've no idea how many times my clients have told stories (gossip-related and otherwise) during programs I've facilitated for them. But I have never consciously put the two together. Linking the two is a good idea, it would seem, but certainly not required for a successful outcome.

nino novak, germany:

for me human actions always happen in two spheres. The "real" one, call it objective or "territory" or grounded or anything like that - and the "spiritual" one, which may be called the subjective or the "map". Now, story telling is the act to join these two spheres. To fit action and interpretation. To learn about what is just going on to happen. To make things discussible. Therefore, story telling for me is the introduction of the meta level: It enables us to create ideas about what is happening. To create maps. (But please use this view with care - for I'm rather a story listener than a story teller ;-)

glory ressler, ontario, canada:

Oh Nino! Thank you so much... I hear myself articulated so beautifully and simply by you. Yes - I consider storytelling 'the golden bridge' and, like you, consider myself more of a story listener and evoker than a teller. This is the descent phase of the hero's journey, I think, and the one that we're neither comfortable nor skilled traversing yet. The subjective map makers need the objective action-oriented ground travelers... Many happy wishes to you!

harrison owen, maryland, usa:

For me -- Story telling is not an idle pursuit. It is also diametrically opposed to Telling The Truth -- as in giving all the facts. Good stories are beyond facts, and beyond truth -- They create the context in which we can perceive both (facts and truth). so if there is a common story about "the way things are around here" (proper name is Myth) to the effect that it is all sh... That creates the context in which "we" hear whatever is said. So -- The CEO says -- "This is a great place" -- and we "hear" just the opposite. Because The Story is... I rather suspect that OS is "just" story telling. It is sometimes helpful to have a designated "story-telling time" but it will happen anyhow.

Transforming Education

harrison owen, maryland, usa:

This past weekend, a number of us got together here in Washington for a marvelous "deep-think", and amongst the many sessions was one on Transforming Education (K-12) led by Alan Klein. He has a question for all you folks on the LIST which follows. I have invited him to join us, but in the event that doesn't happen, I will pass along your comments.

Alan Wrote:

> I have a question for all Open Spacers that arose from the Phoenix Rising discussions on December 15th. Specifically, we had a session around the question of transforming education (K-12) so that students do not lose their natural ability to self-organize.

> As Harrison says, Open Space is founded on the notion of "Self-Organizing Systems". Specifically on the notion that ALL systems are self-organizing and that we do damage to them by trying to control them from without. I make the assumption that we all buy into that notion (or at least I am aiming my question at those who do.)

> • What if schools were formed as consciously self-organizing systems.
> • What if all participants (parents, staff, and students) were given equal, democratic power and rights within the school?
> • What if students of all ages were recognized as responsible for their own learning?
> • What if this meant that there were no mandated classes, tests, or other externally imposed requirements?
> • What if the only requirement for graduation is to defend (to the entire school community) the thesis that you are ready to take responsibility for yourself in the outside world?

> There are a few schools that operate in this way around the US as well as other places on the planet. What is your reaction to this way of organizing education? What concerns arise in you? What excitements arise? What questions occur to you?

> Thanks, Alan Klein

If you want to contact him -- the email is mailto:alan@klein.net

ralph copleman, new jersey, usa:

Harrison, thanks for sending along Alan Klein's questions.

My immediate thought is that if schools were organized in that fashion, education would then be back in harmony with the natural order of the universe.

 If Alan (or anyone else) wants to check out Thomas Berry's book, "The Great Work", they might enjoy it.

michael m pannwitz, berlin, germany:

Dear Alan, as I read your "what if" questions the second principle we put on posters when introducing os-technology came popping up:

Whatever happens is the only thing that could have. Another way of saying this in German is "Wenn der Hund nicht geschissen haette, haette er den Hasen gefangen", which translates something like "If the dog had not taken time out to shit, he would have caught the rabbit".

So my reaction to your question is simply to lets be on the lookout for schools or subsystems of schools that want to open space....which I believe is one of the possible first steps to consciously experience the open space nature of schools (or any other system). I was fortunate enough to facilitate a 2.5 day open space together with Irmi Gruensteidel for 47 student body representatives of a Berlin highschool (actually 45 from one highschool and 2 "guests" from a highschool where 75% of the students are immigrants). As could have been expected they surfed in this new environment as if they had done it all their life.

This open space according to my count is now the 6th open space within the schoolsystem that "spun off" from one that was held for a crosssection of stakeholders in schools from all over Berlin 3 years ago ... it had as its main theme "The mole learns to fly" which I think is appropriate when you look at schoolsystems in this part of the world. Beyond these 6 open spaces a number of others, I think about 8 spun off into other systems and contexts.

The student body OS mentioned earlier had as its theme "More active! More constructive! More communicative! --- and this is how we will do it." They came up with 36 issues, worked 22 of them and had 17 concrete actionplans produced in the "third day"....the first one: we will become an open space school! A year earlier, when they had their first OS, their vision was "we will be an open space student body council" which in fact they immediately put into practice in turn infecting the parent representatives to have an open space for the whole school (took place last September).

The reason I am telling this at some length is that nobody I know of (certainly not I) had intentionally done anything to bring about an open space organization in schools and still or perhaps just because of this things seem to be developing in that direction....or picking up on your questions again, nobody is consciously forming self-organizing systems, none of the participants

are given equal, democratic power and rights, students are not recognized as responsible for their own learning, there are mandated classes and all the rest and the requirements for graduation are still the same. And: are these the conditions or givens or prerequisites that we have a preference for?

Which takes me back to Harrisons remark "the harder we try the behinder we get" which made Eric Lilius think of the Zen line: "The Great Way is not difficult for those who have no preferences."

This is damn wise and awfully hard to actually be but the more we open space facilitators transform in that direction the more will we contribute to the surfacing of the open space character of organisations.

I hope there will be more schools in my open space work in the future, there is nothing that invigorates me more (another way of saying its just a hell of a lot of fun) than working with students and I wish you and everyone else the fortune of working in schools and other systems with students, kids and other young humans. Merry xmas, michael

eiwor backelund, sweden:

Hallo Alan,

In Sweden we have a certain way of educating adults. We call it liberal adult education and the form is study circles. The meaning behind this form of education is that you yourself are taking the whole responsibility for your own learning. These study circles are to be free and independent and noone can demand you to go to one. You decide for yourself what you want to learn about and what you want to learn in that area.
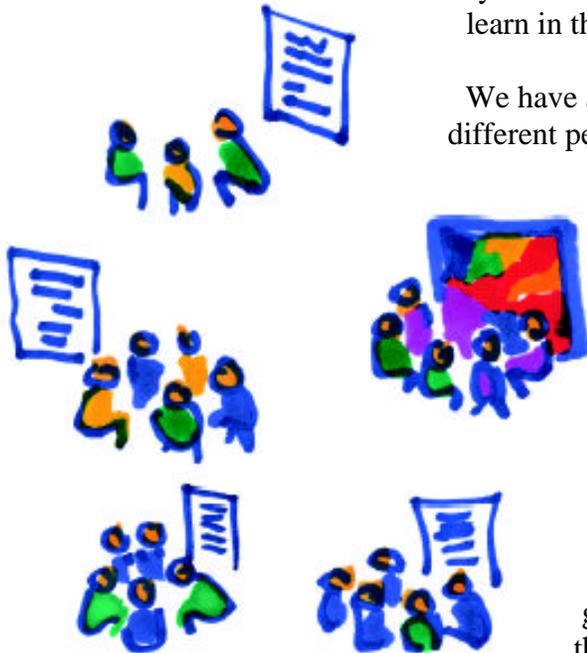
We have a system of 11 study associations which have different perspectives and founding members, some of them are connected to the political parties, some of them to the churches or the sports teams or other organizations. You can always find one that has the same basic values as you have and that suits your picture of the world. These study associations offer a lot of study circles with different themes, i.e. english, weaving, fishing, dancing, politics, what you want to do with your life etc. If you can't find the theme you want then you can always ask them to start a new study circle with what you want to learn. When the association has got a group of people that are interested in the same theme, they invite them to start the circle. On their first

meeting the group decide exactly what they want to learn, how many times they want to meet and what books or material they need for the learning. The learning is based on dialogue and reflection. That means that you read something or do things together and then you talk them over with the group and there must be reflection time between the meetings. Often the groups meet one evening once a week for maybe ten times. You learn a lot together but you don't get any graduation papers.

So this is the essence of the study circle but as we live in a reality where many companies only look for papers on what you know, some of these associations have changed and started to also work with courses that gives you some sort of paper on what you have learnt. My opinion is that this is no good, because many of us learn best when the pressure is off and many things that are valuable learning can't be described on a piece of paper.

We also have schools for adults that are based on the same principles and some of them use OS for larger meetings and that is always a start. My hope is that this way of doing things can get in to the children's schools as well but there are lots of people that have a feeling they are loosing control (as if they had ever had some) and they need to change their way of thinking. The money that these 11 associations need for their work comes mainly from the Swedish government and most of the regions and communities. That is because the associations have the goal to get in touch with immigrants and those who have no education or only very little and let them grow so they can take part in the democrazy work. We believe a country needs educated people (I think there is a better word which I don't know, that also includes the emotional and social competences) to keep the democrazy alive.

About the children's schools, we have a law that says the learning should be based on what the children need and that you have to start with the single child and build the learning in a way that supports that child. It also says that the parents should be involved and decide about the school together with the children and the teachers. Some schools have a board of children, teachers and parents deciding about that school. And some schools let the children do their own planning. And that is great and it works in some places but when it comes to reality the picture is often something else. There are always givens that tells that there are things you can not decide about, and I suppose there must be but not so many as we have today. So there is a lot of work to do. And of course Open Space could work in school. Children know a lot of things but we never seems to ask them about it.

chris weaver, north carolina, usa:

Hi Alan, & thanks Harrison for being the conduit!

I like your questions, and Eiwor's and Michael's responses (I had a feeling this one would draw Michael out of the woods).

I have taught all grades kindergarten through 9th in US public schools. I studied a good deal of Educational Anthropology in grad school. Currently I am the director of what could well be

described as an Open Space Camp for children and youth, on 80 acres in the Southern Appalachian mountains. I will share a few reflections on your notions, one at a time.

> • *What if schools were formed as consciously self-organizing systems.*

Life would be good!

> • *What if all participants (parents, staff, and students) were given equal, democratic power and rights within the school?*

Hm. In the most enlightened educational organizations I've known, there's a lot of open space. But always, certain people hold the responsibility of setting the themes and defining the great mosaic of givens, whether the issue is school structure or curriculum (in the broadest sense). To me, a consciously self-organizing school doesn't concern itself with power, rights, or even equality. These words are like curious tools of a bygone era, not needed (reactions, you might say, to a paradigm of dominance). Leadership processes are always at work, with a varying pattern of leaders...but effective leadership naturally claims its authority, within the givens of time and space that call that leadership into being. Parents, students, and staff each have realms of activity in which they are called to leadership -- with some cross-pollenization being very healthy.

> • *What if students of all ages were recognized as responsible for their own learning?*

I'm a constructivist through and through - people of all ages construct their own knowledge, actively and creatively, reconciling their past learnings of mind, heart, body, and spirit with their present experience (a process that involves some disequilibrium!) But are students of all ages responsible for their own learning? No. If I'm their teacher, or mentor, or coach, or guide, or even their transparent Taoist master, I accept and claim a deep responsibility for the quality of their learning experience. This is first because we all learn in relationship. As the old teacher's saying goes, a child doesn't care how much I know until they know how much I care.

I also accept responsibility for their learning experience because someone initially must set the givens! Maybe the givens are a violin. Maybe the givens are a violin and a scale to play. Maybe the givens are the materials to make a violin. Maybe the givens are a hundred books of poetry, or a creek in the woods, or a diesel engine. Yes, invite young people to choose, and to direct their own learning. But provide them with a whole village full of mentors who love their students, who really know how to do things of this world, and who love the ART of setting givens to establish open spaces for learning. Too much freedom and not enough conscious mentoring leads to, in educator Lillian Katz's phrase, "a mutual exchange of ignorance." (Also see May Sarton's critique of Black Mountain College in her journal, The House by the Sea.)

So yes, the student "does the learning." But as the years go by I realize that I can't overestimate the power and art of a great mentor to invite a learning experience into being. Mentoring is an ancient human birthright, and to me the dream of the kind of school you invite us to think about, Alan, is the dream of reclaiming the art of mentoring for all.

> *• What if this meant that there were no mandated classes, tests, or other externally imposed requirements?*

Lovely. Though, in a different way than you mean, there are many externally imposed requirements. If a theme is, "How do we paddle a skin-covered umiak on Puget Sound from Southworth to Suquamish?" (as it was for a group of eleven-year-olds I once knew) then one externally imposed requirement is that the current in Rich Passage runs four knots against you on the ebb tide. Not three -- four. That is to say, a curriculum that is open to the world is in continuous negotiation with the world's imposed requirements - again, the givens. These givens challenge and empower and sometimes confound us. What's funny is that even a standardized test was created with these effects in mind - to challenge, to empower, to confound, in an entirely measurable way, like a factory...the mechanics of learning with the heart cut out.

> *• What if the only requirement for graduation is to defend (to the entire school community) the thesis that you are ready to take responsibility for yourself in the outside world?*

An interesting notion. Again, the language reveals our common way of thinking in education (defend implies judgement; take responsibility for yourself implies acute individualism). But I get your drift - to present to the community, in depth, your creative vision, your practical dreams, your skills, resources, and capacities for a meaningful path of life.

So, as you can probably tell, I would never tire of conversing on this subject. I have opened space in public schools, and will do so again...but I am at present exceedingly grateful to be working in an educational setting (the camp) free of public schools' institutional constraints. We have a land base and near-complete curricular freedom. And it's a back-door into public education; this fall we gave 900 public middle school students a day each of Open Space here, in groups of 75, with a great staff of artists and other mentors, and many of their teachers were astonished to see that their students know how to self-organize. If we keep walking our talk as an OS organization, we'll provide lots of children, youth, and educators with experiences that will leave them wanting more...

john engle, haiti:

chris, read your responses and reflections with great interest. look forward to the day when i can visit the camp and witness how spirit is working there.

glory ressler, ontario, canada:

Hooray for Chris and the Camp!!!   BTW - I'm appreciating deeply this discussion... best wishes for a joyous and meaning-filled Holiday season, glory

denis hitchens, australia:

Thanks also to you.   I take my lead as follows:

From Don Tinkler: About Learning 1994

"Sound pedagogy" is much more than "instruction". In applying sound pedagogy, the role of the teacher expands to include all of the following:

• selecting experiences using quality as a measure of appropriateness;

• organising, timing, monitoring and managing the experiences;

• providing order in the experiences presented (giving consideration to the scope and sequence in what is developed and presented as curriculum);

• attempting to reduce some of the complexity of the material or information being presented (The world for both children and adults is indeed complex, but if the complexity is reduced in presenting ideas initially, the learnings often make more sense when later placed back into their original complexity.);

• drawing learners into purposeful two-way communication (generating a climate where learners are free to inquire, to explore issues, to formulate questions, to express ideas, to debate points of view, and to seek solutions to problems);

• extending the learners' interaction with the learning environment (extending the range and variety of the learning context).

So I'm not too sure about the balance of responsibility. I can attempt to sequence things and reduce complexity etc but this is still my view. If the learner is to 'construct' own world view, a fair degree of true responsibility (I would think *most*) rests on them. Basically because they are constructing for their journey. Like OS I think we have to trust and be prepared to 'be surprised'; which we are all the time.

It's good to be not alone

chris corrigan, british columbia, canada:

Hi there. Time to weigh in as a parent who is homeschooling my kids and participating in the evolution of an Open Space learning centre for children and families here on my little island off the coast of Canada.

Harrison Owen wrote:

> • *What if schools were formed as consciously self-organizing systems.*

Indeed it is how learning occurs at schools, in spite of all the imposed structure. Students end up learning when the can spontaneously organize around their passions.

See John Taylor Gatto.

> • *What if all participants (parents, staff, and students) were given equal, democratic power and rights within the school?*

See the Sudbury Valley School in Massachusetts, and the book by Daniel Greenberg on the same. Some are very successful.

> • *What if students of all ages were recognized as responsible for their own learning?*

That is the basis of unschooling, a philosophy championed by John Holt. Any of his books will tell you the story, especially Learning All the Time.

> • *What if this meant that there were no mandated classes, tests, or other externally imposed requirements?*

Many unschoolers find themselves recruited to places like Harvard and Yale on the basis of a portfolio of work rather than a transcript. The Ivy league registrars have led the way in recognizing the inherent value of an education that eschews standardized testing and home/unschoolers are heavily recruited by these schools....if they choose to go there!

> • *What if the only requirement for graduation is to defend (to the entire school community) the thesis that you are ready to take responsibility for yourself in the outside world?*

The alternative middle school here on my island, Island Pacific School has a major thesis requirement which is passion/responsibility driven. They have other academic standards, but the masterwork is the really interesting thing that they do.

> *There are a few schools that operate in this way aound the US as well as other places on the planet. What is your reaction to this way of organizing education? What concerns arise in you? What excitements arise? What questions occur to you?*

I parent and homeschool in Open Space, as do others. In Vancouver at OSonOS there were a few discussions about this too. Check the proceedings at http://www.openspaceworld.org for more. My friend Brent Cameron (http://www.wondertree.org) lead a session in Vancouver on this stuff too, and a few of the OSonOS participants visited more with him. Perhaps they have something to share?

I have a few links to resources at http://www.chriscorrigan.com/mamasalon.html for you to explore. Cheers, Chris

john engle, haiti:

thanks for sharing your reflections and activities, chris. i'm not surprised to learn of the fascinating things with which you are involved.

i went along to the wondertree school during my time in vancouver and spent time with brent. haitian colleagues were with me. vancouver osonos was a very rich and meaningful time for me. the visit to wondertree and time with brent were an important part of the magic.

stories, images, and ideas that brent shared with us have stayed with me and are influencing my refections around education. ...the idea of 8 year olds learning to manage resources, creating a budget, making decisions about who they might contract to help them learn what they've decided they wanted to learn...

people like brent, like harrison, help us to push the envelope on what is possible.

chris weaver, north carolina, usa:

> *Denis wrote: So I'm not too sure about the balance of responsibility. I can attempt to sequence things and reduce complexity etc but this is still my view. If the learner is to 'construct' own world view, a fair degree of true responsibility (I would think *most*) rests on them. Basically because they are constructing for their journey. Like OS I think we have to trust and be prepared to 'be surprised'; which we are all the time.*

Thank you Denis, this is well-said. Indeed, how important, both trust and being prepared to be surprised: Openness to the learner.

I can consider it true that a student is responsible for his/her own learning...yes, *most*, or perhaps all. And I ask: How can this not be a lonely responsibility?

My fascination now is with the art of the teacher/mentor/uncle/grandmother/parent. This can be the art of the co-learner, sister/brother also. Establishing...no, CREATING givens, for learning experiences to happen in the newly-bounded open space. And of course the art of holding the space without asserting control.

So there is the organizational question about what kind of "school" would serve as the setting for the deepest learning, the fullest human thriving. And there is also the question of: what is the art, what are the dispositions, the patterns and principles, the responsibilities of mentoring?

When we talk about how children learn and how we think about that, we are of course talking about culture. And when we consider creating new learning environments, we are involved in culture-creation. So stories will help us.

A wee story:

I was teaching a K-1-2 class in Seattle in 1992. During a parent-teacher-child convergence in November, the mother of a first grader (six years old) told me that Celia would be leaving to live with her uncle in Alaska. (Celia's family is of the Tlingit Nation, of the canoe cultures of the Northwest coast).

I said, "Oh! Is your family moving?" "No," replied Celia's mom. "Just Celia. She really likes her uncle. He's a fisherman. She told us last week she wants to go live with him." And so she did.

What I have encountered many times in my teaching work with Indigenous people in the USA is that children's inner authority to direct their own learning is accepted as a given. Children choose who to learn from within the extended family or community by following an inner knowing.

At what age are children "developmentally ready" to do this? Ha Ha! According to a case study from Educational Anthropologists George and Louise Spindler, who lived with people of the Menominee Nation in Wisconsin, certain Elders in the community were held in great esteem for their ability to understand the language of newborn babies and translate for them. Beloved beings, just-arrived from the spirit world, already on a path they have chosen and with important things to say.

Working in education with Native communities also showed me how seriously the adults take the responsibility of mentoring. It is a part of what all adults do, and not only with their "own" kids, but with whichever kids choose them. One-on-one, or in a small group, the physical manifestation might be cooking or doing beadwork or shooting the basketball, but the knowledge transferred is about Everything that matters.

 So my fascination and work-attention is with this combination - open space for the passion, responsibility, inner authority of children...mentors as responsive givens-creators and space-holders for learning experiences, beyond what could ever be measured...and a "school" that establishes and nurtures the open space for it all.

tova averbuch, israel:

It is poetry to my ear! Not only your way of seeing education and children makes perfect sense to me but it also made me clarify and deepen the answer to a question I am often asked: "How open is the open space"? Thank you thank, you and of course to Harrison and Alan for enabling it

Self-Organization, Spirit ...and Invitation

harrison owen, maryland, usa:

Further to our ongoing conversation about self-organizing systems -- a possibly weird thought. Self-Organization is what Consciousness (Spirit) does. Rather than being in opposition (as in either/or), or even in juxtaposition (as in both/and) there is unity. Self-Organization and the work of Spirit are one. The problem comes when the "self" in self-organization is understood to mean my self. Then it seems that I am imprisoned by unseen powers that restrict (destroy) my freedom. And I don't like that. However as the evolution of consciousness proceeds (My Spirit grows up, my Now gets bigger), it is realized the my self is inextricably related to all selves -- and ultimately to The Self, -- and there is no problem. This is not the destruction of ego (self), but the transcendence. And what else would The Self do -- but organize. How about those bananas?

A little esoteric and abstract to be sure, but it may just accord with one of the often reported experiences in Open Space. On the one hand there is a profound realization of community (the appearance of a larger self) and simultaneously folks report that they feel a heightened sense of personal empowerment, but always in the context of that community. They go with the flow and get with the program -- willingly, and with a remarkable sense of joy. And it is all self-organization. Maybe?

jim metcalf, ontario, canada:

It seems to me that the ancient Hebrew prophets wrote poetically about the Spirit of Love bringing order out of chaos. Harrison, Winston, are you talking about this kind of thing?

...I recall that in the "Venus" book of his space trilogy, C. S. Lewis wrote about individuals finding enhanced individuality in their divine unity with one another, much as Harrison writes.

jeff aitken, california, usa:

Harrison's post reminds me about four questions offered by Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers, authors of A Simpler Way http://www.berkana.org. They offer four questions for group reflection after a meeting or crucial event which are intended to support self-organizing the way that Life does it:

1. Can we talk?

2. What just happened?

(To me these are the implied questions of the closing reflective circle of an OST. Nice to speak them out loud.)

3. Who else should be here?

(The third question might speak to the Exterior development of a system -- thinking about Wilber's quadrant model.)

4. Who are we now?

(The fourth question might speak to Harrison's notion of a new and bigger Self, which we might call the Interior development of a system. "Life organizes around a Self. Organizing is always the act of creating an identity." - A Simpler Way, p 3)

Think these can be helpful after OST? Seems like another level of the work, beyond action planning.   Cheers - Jeff

PS: I do not expect that one let go of the benefits of an identity in order to embrace the benefits of a new & larger one. I enjoy this body and personality and cultural heritage, thank you very much. Let's not become hairless gray cerebral space aliens; long live Star Trek!

...and later:

PS I was not commenting on anything Harrison wrote with that note of mine about space aliens! Thanks for your generous responses HHO.   Jeff

harrison owen, maryland, usa:

Right on! And another verse to the same song (in my song book) is The Medicine Wheel -- which I find to be a simple, elegant way of enabling the reflective process. It is clear to me that having a great meeting, converging all the issues, and generating an action plan is all very nice, but not sufficient -- without some reflection (albeit brief) on Who is the "we" that has done all this, and what are we becoming?????

Nor are we required to -- in my experience. This is not an either/or but a both/and. I find my personal identity and power increases to the extent that Iam consciously a part of a greater community. The "bigger" the community, the bigger the me. Martin Buber all over again. I become an "I" only in relationship with a "Thou" (read an other or community). But that relationship must be of a particular sort -- respect. And, I don't think that is the end of the journey, nor does the journey necessarily ends in our becoming a "hairless gray cerebral space alien." There could come a time when, what we experience as a transitory peak experience of being in the flow (in the zone), becomes a continuing reality. I have seen groups in Open Space (as also in the open space of our lives) achieve and sustain such a condition for some small periods of time. And they weren't all esoteric weirdos -- a jazz group, a basket ball team, even a bunch of AT&T folks. Sitting on the "outside" i can only describe the experience as incandescent. Those involved spoke of effortless flight. Pretty neat.

julie smith, alaska, usa:

By letting go and letting be, OS allows for an expanded consciousness that results in the natural fading of existing problems (and passionate engagement in what is important to the group), while most forms of mediation and facilitation tend to focus on solving problems logically on the existing level of consciousness.

carl jung:

"All the greatest and most important problems of life are fundamentally insoluble…. They can never be solved, but only outgrown. This "outgrowing" proved on further investigation to require a new level of consciousness. Some higher or wider interest appeared on the patient's   horizon, and through this broadening of his or her outlook the insoluble problem lost its urgency. It was not solved logically in its own terms but faded when confronted with a new and stronger life urge."

harrison owen, maryland, usa:

By Jove -- I think she's Got it!

Conflict can be handled (indeed it is a very positive thing) so long as there is plenty of space, and the space keeps growing. At a physical level this is all about the Law of Two Feet. At a more subtle level, I agree Julie -- it is about expanding consciousness. A bigger Now that allows plenty of room for all sorts of differences which become conflict if too narrowly constrained.

ralph copleman, new jersey, usa:

Julie and all... Let us be careful.... The key word in your statement may be "allows". I have seen what you describe happen in OS countless times – but expanded consciousness does not *automatically* occur. I also believe that OS is not the only technique (large group or other) that makes expanded consciousness possible. So if we're looking for ways to distinguish OS from other approaches, I'm not sure this is it. But keep at it!

harrison owen, maryland, usa:

Ralph, I think your caution is a very valid one, and a key word is "allows" or I might prefer invites. The invitation to an expanded Now (consciousness) is issued each time space is opened. It is certainly permissive, in that room is provided that allows consciousness to expand, but I think it is more than that. There is a positive expectation, hope, dream that those present will see their world in larger terms, that the narrow options they entered with will be expanded to include options previously un-thought of. Importantly, this is a true invitation -- which means that it cannot be coercive. Nobody has to do a thing, which is why The Law of Two feet and voluntary

self-selection are so critical. So does consciousness always expand? Probably not -- as doubtless there are folks who enter as curmudgins and leave in a similar condition. I can attest to that very personally. Having said all that, I think it is also important to note that "expanded consciousness" is probably not an absolute. As in you either got it or don't got it. For me it is always a process, a journey of expanding consciousness. So even us curmudgins probably grow a little bit, or at least we can see the possibility.

To your last point: "..that OS is not the only technique (large group or other) that makes expanded consciousness possible." For sure. But it seems to me that there might be a useful "metric" here of sorts. Specifically in terms of other large group interventions and the place that Open Space may hold amongst them -- we might ask, how much space does each intervention offer? I can't say that I have been through all 18 (if that is the magic number), but I can say that some of those 18 which i have experienced make me feel absolutely claustrophobic, and others less so. It is only when I enter Open Space that I begin to feel fully free to be my self, and fully explore my/our possibilities. Obviously I am a very biased witness, and others will feel differently -- which is as it should be. But I think the question remains valid -- How much space do we really have?

julie smith, alaska, usa:

thanks, Ralph!...As I was pondering this, I realized I didn't quite hit the nail on the head. It isn't that Open Space allows for expanded consciousness, perhaps, but that it invites us to more fully express our current level of consciousness. (And what a gift that is!) It is unlike many other group processes in that it doesn't erect artificial barriers to our full expression of our present consciousness. (I get it, Harrison.... we are invited to more fully express our Now, our current state of consciousness.... to the extent that we express it and share it, we individually and collectively expand.) The experience might lead us on a spiral of expanding consciousness, and it might not. That part is up to each of us to choose. What Open Space offers is simply the invitation to more fully express who we are in the present moment.   Is that closer?

harrison owen, maryland, usa:

I think so. It is all about an invitation to expanding consciousness -- with the emphasis on invitation and expanding. Nobody has to take the trip. But we can. The choice is ours -- first, last, and always.

michael herman, chicago, usa:

> *Harrison Owen wrote... your caution is a very valid one, and a key word is "allows" or I might prefer invites. The invitation to an expanded Now (consciousness) is issued each time space is opened.*

just wanting to put in another plug for this notion and story of 'inviting,' as i think it captures so much of the difference between open space and the rest of organization and org development... the voluntary self selection, the call to become what you want to see in the world, passion bounded by responsibility, the open circle and marketplace, cycle of self-organization (inviting to gather, inviting to breakouts, inviting to proceed(ings), inviting to gather again where needed, inviting to breakouts, inviting to proceed...)

achieving in org is required, inspiration and aspiration are often wished for but flattened if we try to put them on the 'to do' list. 'inviting' is something we can do as an everyday business practice... issuing invites to open spaces large and small, short and long... and inviting is also something we can aspire to be as individuals and organizations...

like the 'open' in open space, it's also a word that is known to all and fairly uncorruptable, meaning if the leader says he/she wants to invite but doesn't embody 'inviting' everybody knows. as harrison has said, if people call something 'open space' when it's really not, those participants are sure to notice the difference.

more often than not frame the whole open space story as practice in invitation. we often talk about 'opening and holding space' as the doing of the facilitator, but i find people understand 'inviting' a bit quicker, and understand how they could actually do it. it's just a bit less mystical, i think.

i've posted a whole collection of materials in something that i describe loosely as 'a book'. it's called "inviting organization: evolution is now and open space." it's all about opening space as invitation in organization... and the emergence of the inviting organization. fully browsable and downloadable, free for taking and sharing. http://inviting.michaelherman.com

Holding Space in Conflict

julie smith, alaska, usa:

This piece about taking another look at how we think about conflict is also important. There is a growing profession developing around this question, of which I am a tiny part. I don't hear OS practitioners talking much about conflict resolution, but I wonder whether there are some important lessons for conflict resolution professionals in the work you're doing. I think the answer is yes, but I haven't quite figured out what the lessons are.

chris weaver, north carolina, usa:

Not knowing much about the profession of conflict resolution, I expect that there is a lot of resonance.

I imagine that there are many mediators who see themselves as space-holders rather than fixers. I imagine that there are mediators who in some way invite those "in conflict" to consider a larger circle of viewpoints by holding space for a diversity of voices - not just the polarized "other" but a circle of those affected and those who care.

My friend does victim-offender mediation, sometimes in the aftermath of violent crime. There is much in common about how he and I prepare for our work, but to me his space-holding requires more courage - warrior energy, tested tried & true. And an unwavering trust in & service to the transforming power of love.

Interesting though...when I think of "conflict resolution" I picture two people across a table from one another, with a mediator in between, and I think, what a set-up. How could there be healing without the circle? How could healing be sustained without a circle of "the right people," who have responded to an open invitation? And what would be the theme? Thanks, Julie...I find a great deal to think about here.

julie smith, alaska, usa:

My husband, the builder, tells me of the boards and pipes dancing in his head, weaving together in his mind, to his hands, creating our home. Ideas dance through my head, weaving together in my mind, to my fingers on the keyboard, creating I know not what.

Today's vision:

The short version:
In our spiral of expanding consciousness, we outgrow conflict.

The long version:
During our journey, we encounter conflict. As in all things, we have two choices:

1.We can respond with fear. (In the Thomas-Kilman model, for you CR professionals, fear might wear the face of avoidance, accommodation, competition, or compromise)

2.We can respond with love. (In the T-K model, the face of collaboration)

Most of us experiment for a very long time with one or more of the fear-based responses to conflict. None of these responses fully engages the humanity/divinity of all the people involved in the conflict. From this place of fear-based response, it is an advance, a forward movement of expanding consciousness, to recognize the positive value of conflict that is expressed when we respond to conflict with collaboration. When we advance to a collaborative model, we seek to fully engage and honor and respect every person involved in the conflict. As we engage in collaborative responses to conflict (through a variety of processes, including OS and mediation) we experience fuller and more genuine engagement with others, we are awed and inspired by the beauty and natural intelligence of humanity, and our ability to love expands.

And then….. there comes a point where conflict itself is no longer meaningful. It fades away because, in Jung's words, "[s]ome higher or wider interest appeared on the… horizon, and through this broadening of… outlook the insoluble problem lost its urgency. It was not solved logically in its own terms but faded when confronted with a new and stronger life urge."

From this place on the spiral, experiencing and practicing what it means to engage with love with everyone in every moment becomes the "new and stronger life urge." From this place, engaging in our own conflict is a step backwards, a reflection of a momentary return to fear, an error to be healed.

…..which leaves the question of whether and how we engage in the conflicts of others…… I think the focus on particular processes must also fade…..

I think there comes a point of flow, where we simply accept the unfolding of people and events around us. Our sole responsibility is to quietly maintain our integrity to our loving intention, to be still often enough and long enough to hear our inner wisdom, and to choose our actions accordingly.

harrison owen, maryland, usa:

Yes.

ken west, california, usa:

In conflict, for me, I want each person to be able to tell their whole story, without interruption, and to be heard with compassion. First I ask them to tell me the story alone, Let it crock pot

(Simmer) for a few days and then share it with the other. I want nothing in the room but chairs, no place to hide and nothing to get behind. Yes, OS is in many ways the essence of conflict resolution (my practice) as in OS a person takes responsibility and passion and is implicitly given the honor of a full listening. No two people are in a conflict it is the community as well. The process allows for and invites the participants to consider how to heal the community. I think when I am most successful the process works on a spiral with Macro and Micro weaving and separating. Dynamic processes invite/require open space. Peace is Security

julie smith, alaska, usa:

> *chris weaver wrote: Not knowing much about the profession of conflict resolution, I expect that there is a lot of resonance.*

Yes.

> *I imagine that there are many mediators who see themselves as space-holders rather than fixers.*

Yes.

> *I imagine that there are mediators who in some way invite those "in conflict" to consider a larger circle of viewpoints by holding space for a diversity of voices - not just the polarized "other" but a circle of those affected and those who care. Sometimes. For me, this happens most often in child custody mediations. In these mediations, I consciously hold space for the children. Sometimes I do this silently, and sometimes I verbalize it.*

> *My friend does victim-offender mediation, sometimes in the aftermath of violent crime. There is much in common about how he and I prepare for our work, but to me his space-holding requires more courage - warrior energy, tested tried & true. And an unwavering trust in & service to the transforming power of love.*

I'm also involved in victim offender mediation, though I haven't done a large number of mediations in this area. The ones I've done have been with juvenile offenders. Our local youth court has developed a victim offender mediation program using youth and adult co-mediators to reflect the typical mediation participants: youth offender and adult victim. (Initially the program was set up with two adult co-mediators. The youth-adult co-mediation model is much better.)

> *Interesting though...when I think of "conflict resolution" I picture two people across a table from one another, with a mediator in between, and I think, what a set-up. How could there be healing without the circle? How could healing be sustained without a circle of "the right people," who have responded to an open invitation? And what would be the theme?*

Two is a circle. So is three. Any more than one. Sometimes two or three is "the right people."

chris weaver, north carolina, usa:

Two is a circle. Beautiful. Thank you. So is three. Any more than one. Sometimes two or three is the right people. Yes, I see. And I reckon that one is a circle too.

birgitt williams, north carolina, usa:

During the decade I spent developing the Genuine Contact program to assist individuals to learn to develop conscious Open Space Organizations, I experimented with what worked regarding conflict resolution. Please note that my exploration distinguished between mediation, negotiation, and REAL RESOLUTION.

Within the Genuine Contact program, when we look at conflict resolution, we emphasize that the BEST means of conflict resolution is an Open Space Technology meeting dealing with a critical business issue for which all participants have passion(the theme is not about the conflict resolution). Inevitably, as the business issue is getting dealt with, someone eventually begins discussions that lead to raising the topic of the conflict, and then dealing with it—no TRAINED facilitators involved in the discussions that emerge within the bigger OST meeting. Within the Genuine Contact program, when we look at conflict resolution, we emphasize that using Whole Person Process Facilitation (in which participants use their intuition to choose who they work with and how they will do the work within a preset agenda) again dealing with a key business issue rather than the conflict itself, allows the conflict to be raised and dealt with.

Most frequently, conflict is resolved in either of these processes by the participants themselves, without anyone else needing to be involved. It is not because the people necessarily wanted to resolve the conflict, but because they want to get on with the business opportunities for which they have passion and recognize for themselves that the conflict needs to be resolved to get on with it. Their passion takes them beyond their attachment to victim behavior, their passion takes them beyond their attachment to conflict….

And from time to time, the people most involved in the conflict, most affected by it, make it part of their action plans to get assistance after the meeting for conflict resolution. Conflict resolution processes are then in response to their expressed WILL. OST and Whole Person Process Facilitation are wonderful for surfacing that WILL. And I don't know of any successful conflict resolution if the WILL is not there. Within the Genuine Contact program, we offer a two day program in facilitating conflict resolution so that the OST facilitators who are learning skills with the conscious Open Space Organization have a chance to reflect about the use of OST meetings and Whole Person Process Facilitated meetings in conflict resolution. And to equip them with a process for an intentional conflict resolution process if it is asked for. In developing this part of our program, we emphasize Angeles Arrien's work with conflict resolution which in turn relies heavily on conflict resolution processes taught at US schools for diplomats. Well researched.

julie smith, alaska, usa:

Thank you for your detailed explanation of how conflict resolution and OST weave together in your practice. You captured what has been the deepest learning for me about OS when you said:

> *Most frequently, conflict is resolved in either of these processes by the participants themselves, without anyone else needing to be involved. It is not because the people necessarily wanted to resolve the conflict, but because they want to get on with the business opportunities for which they have passion and recognize for themselves that the conflict needs to be resolved to get on with it. Their passion takes them beyond their attachment to victim behavior, their passion takes them beyond their attachment to conflict...*

When I think about some of the employment mediations I've been involved in, I think of the myriad overlapping issues and people who were talked about as contributing in some way to the conflict, but who were not involved directly in the mediation because they were not the primary participants in the conflict. And I think about the people who would sit in my office drawing diagrams of how the organization could work if things were restructured to better suit the people who worked there, and then throwing up their hands because their ideas were too big for the process that was offered to them. Those issues felt too big for mediation because the stated task, the given, was to resolve the conflict between a small group of people, and not to restructure the organization. I can see how in these kinds of situations, opening up the space and invoking the law of two feet could lead to dramatic and positive change within an organization. I can also see how upper management might resist large-scale opening space and change, and might desire and ask for mediation as a way to resolve the most obvious and pressing conflicts within the organization without requiring THEM to significantly engage or change.

harrison owen, maryland, usa:

Doubtless there are innumerable situations such as you describe, particularly ones where upper management refuses engagement or change. One side of all of us says -- well if we can't do everything, let's do what we can. And above everything else let's try and help the people caught in the middle. I know the syndrome, but I question it's wisdom. Organizations with such short sighted management hopefully will not survive too long, and in any event I am not sure that I want to be party to their sustenance. My reasons are two. First life is very short and sweet, and given the fact that there are endless opportunities to help folks who really do want to get on with the business of meaningful life, why should we waste it helping those who refuse to help themselves? Secondly, and this becomes an ethical consideration for me, let's suppose that we are wildly successful -- the conflict has been mediated AND the folks at the top never got their hands dirty, nor did they have take responsibility for a miserable situation they created. Who wins? Harsh, I suppose, but we only have so much life to give -- and how we choose to give it makes a difference, I think.

julie smith, alaska, usa:

As for who we help, my choice has been to help and be helped by whoever happens along. For me, remaining aware of the quality of my response to whoever arrives in front of me and whoever I arrive in front of is part of the flow. It's part of letting go of any particular expectation and any particular outcome. A Good response is one that meets the other where they are, joins with them authentically, interacts with integrity until the interaction is done, and gently moves on. The interaction can be very brief…. a moment of eye contact or a smile….. or it can last varying amounts of time, up to a lifetime. I know it's over when it feels good. (Glory, you have such a lovely signature line that gets at this…. I don't recall exactly what it says…… something like 'if it doesn't feel good, our story isn't over…..')

A glimmer of understanding on my horizon now….. it isn't authentic, Harrison, for you to interact with groups in ways that require more words or technique or reliance on you as a facilitator/leader. What is authentic for you is to express trust in their ability to find their own answers, and to help by holding space with them. What that "holding space" is, is a manifestation of Spirit at work in you, co-creating with them an energy of creativity, good will, and unbounded possibility. Having experienced this so many times, it is inconceivable to you to respond to requests for a lesser experience. Your inner wisdom resists being and doing less than you are capable of.

Is that it?

As for the rest of us, we also have to find what is authentic for us. Authenticity isn't something that can be transferred. We each have to look inside and find what is authentic for us. My understanding of OS is that it encourages each of us to authentically express our true selves, unbounded by artificial boundaries or expectations.

julie smith, alaska, usa:

Someone here recently said something about working at providing people as much space as they can take. I think that's right. For example, mediation is often much better for individuals and organizations than the grievance process. If management is willing to go with mediation, but isn't ready for OS, then mediation might be the best we can do. I've also seen organizations engage staff in collaborative negotiation trainings, to help people learn to solve problems on their own before they turn into larger problems. That also seems to me to be a health-inducing decision very much in keeping with the values of OS….. in OS lingo, a way of teaching people how to open space in a circle of two.

I think mediation also has a place in situations that OS doesn't approach (or hasn't yet approached, to my knowledge). I'm thinking of situations where people perceive it is not in their best interest to invoke the law of two feet.

harrison owen, maryland, usa:

Maybe I just hit the hot-spots, but I don't think my experience is unique. Case in point was a nasty situation in Latin America. Two weeks before I arrived to open some space the Plant Manager and The Shop Steward (Labor) were at machete points --literally. We closed the whole plant and 500 people sat in a circle. They all spoke Spanish. I don't. I did what I could -- Hold Space, and they talked -- about everything. 18 hours later, I found the Plant manager and The Shop Steward embraced and in tears. Those who had trouble with their feet learned to use them -- or at the very least they learned that they had a choice, and were responsible either way. And when the whole thing was done, everybody knew that THEY had done it. Even if I had been able to speak Spanish, the likelihood that I could have been present at every instance of need was small -- and more to the point, I wasn't needed. I guess part of the problem here is that there seems to be a general presumption that just because you as the facilitator are not saying something, or doing something (overt) you have no impact or contribution. There are in fact subtle realms to be explored and worked with, and maybe another strand of our conversation might take a look at all of this?

julie smith, alaska, usa:

I do not assume the facilitator needs to be speaking or doing something to have a positive impact on a group. One of my favorite lines is: "Don't just do something, sit there!" (I first read this in something by Thich Naht Hanh, I'm not sure of the original author.) I would be very interested in exploring more about the subtle realms.

...Sometimes the conflict really does need to be dealt with openly and directly between the people who are in it. In those situations, mediation can be a very simple, elegant, and powerful process. In many ways, like OS. Also a little different. I think people who are in intense conflict who come to mediation experience considerable stress and anxiety about the conflict and the mediation. From what I know so far, they need more support than the typical OS participant. As a result, most mediators openly engage at a deeper level with participants than does an OS facilitator (as I understand it). Mediators don't engage in an effort to control or to solve the problem, but to provide enough understanding and emotional safety that each person can tolerate the stress of sustained interaction with the person they are in conflict with.

harrison owen, maryland, usa:

There is no question that good mediators can and do achieve marvelous results. But as I observe such folks at work, it seems to me that the less they do, the more they achieve, and under optimal circumstances, they apparently do nothing at all. In my experience, you can tell the "newbies" by their attention to the detail of the process, making sure that the right words are said, and the appropriate steps taken. Watch an old pro and you never see their hands move or their lips. So how about this as an idea-- All Open Space is Mediation, and all Mediation is Open Space?

julie smith, alaska, usa:

Ummmmmm……. I would prefer to not adopt this particular idea. :)   Mediation has a hard enough time defining itself without adding OS into the mix!   In spite of the many similarities, I think there are also important differences. Many mediators are minimalists, and believe strongly in the power of doing nothing when nothing is called for. I think most mediators also believe that sometimes, something is called for. Usually that something is small….. but it is something. The something might share space in the subtle realms, but it also sometimes manifests in the material realm through words or actions.

I think mediators create emotionally safe space so people can reach a deeper understanding of themselves and others. In the subtle realm, understanding and love and healing are somehow all the same. I don't usually use the words love and healing to describe what happens in mediation, but I think this is an accurate description of what sometimes happens in mediation.

Mediators provide their presence, and hold space. In this way, mediation is like OS. Mediators also speak. In this way, mediation is unlike OS.

When mediators speak, they speak their understanding of the Now of each participant. They speak their understanding of the present state of consciousness, of the understanding of the world currently perceived by each person. As that understanding is spoken, each person (including the mediator) shifts. Sometimes there is relief that comes from being understood by another. Sometimes there is insight from hearing another speak the thoughts they couldn't hear from the person they are fearful of. Sometimes there is a spiral of increasing clarity as information is shared and understandings are explored.

Mediators make choices. When to speak, when to remain silent. I often tend toward silence, toward letting things go as they will. I also choose to speak sometimes. For me, there is an openness, a freedom, that comes from being in a process in which I, too, can speak. For me, it is an expression of my inclusion in the humanity of the situation……we are all in the room, together with the goal of helping solve the problem. If my words can be salve to the soul of those engaged in the struggle, and can perhaps help move the struggle forward, then I want to offer them. I have so often been the beneficiary of the words of others that I feel compelled to return the gift.

julie smith, alaska, usa:

Sometimes I think of mediation as creating circles of two: me and A, and then me and B, and then back again, talking about what has happened, how it felt, and how it feels. As those circles become comfortable and A and B relax within their individual circles with me, learning to trust that they will be listened to and understood, they gradually reach out to each other. For a time, they hang onto their relationship with me as support, and we create a circle of three. As they become more comfortable, they leave me behind, and create their own circle of two. (This is my favorite part. I think of myself as blending into the wallpaper of the room….. present but unnoticed.)   Often something difficult will be said, fear will rise, and one or both will reach back

to me for support, and we're back to a circle of three. I will help summarize or clarify or validate, working toward deeper understanding, the fear will diminish, and they go back to their circle of two. Eventually, if they choose to, they will reach a new understanding, and perhaps a formal or informal agreement.

It seems to me that OS and mediation and other processes are tools. My husband, the carpenter, has many tools. Each is ideally suited for different tasks. His skill is to understand the best use of each tool, and to use it accordingly. I think the same is true of the work we do.

harrison owen, maryland, usa:

Julie -- I think there is an enormous amount that we can all learn from each other. And for sure I am not advocating the elimination of Mediation as a thing to do. There is definitely a time and a place for the intense, face-to-face, supportive environment that a good mediator provides. I guess what concerns me is that I see a lot of folks in organizational life who assume that every time conflict shows its ugly head a call goes out for the mediators. At worst this creates mountains of learned helplessness and needless co-dependency. I would say essentially the same thing about those involved in Community Building and Stress Reduction. We have learned a great deal from both groups -- but from where I sit the real issue is to find effective ways in which to enhance the self-healing process in our communities (whether that be businesses or whatever) -- with the absolute minimum of intervention. I think what we have learned from 15 years of Open Space is how much can be accomplished with less. And I don't think we are at the end of that learning. My mantra over the years has been -- Think of one more thing NOT to do. You keep striping away and striping away. Perhaps there is an irreducible minimum, but I haven't seen it yet. All of which I take to be extraordinarily good news, if only for reasons of economics. Given the levels and complexity of the stress and conflict in our world, we simply do not have enough stress reducers, community builders and mediators to go around, and it is doubtful that we could pay for them all, even if we did have the numbers. I consider Open Space not so much a tool as an on-going natural experiment in enabling the process of self-healing, which is but one of the many gifts of self-organization -- otherwise known as Spirit at Work.

julie smith, alaska, usa:

Harrison, you make me chuckle. Most mediators I know definitely do NOT see themselves as mainstream. Far from it. I would also differ with you about characterizing mediation as fostering learned helplessness and needless co-dependency. I see mediation, like OS, as a means of fostering self-determination and self-empowerment.

I'm interested in your thought about enhancing self-healing in our communities….. and wonder what the difference is between self-healing and healing….. but my brain is tired and my stomach oh so empty…… don't you serve food at these OS events????? Thanks for this forum and for this enriching conversation.

john engle, haiti:

I appreciate what you have shared here. seems it is wise to recognize that the typical use of the word conflict encompasses anything from disputes between co-workers to people wanting to kill others. given this, we must be open to approaches that vary.

thank you again for your insights. the use of open space in extreme conflicts (where one hates to the point of being willing to kill), and in healing people who are very, very broken are areas that i wish to learn more about.

naomi kahane, quebec, canada:

I, too, wonder about how to open a space for dialogue between antagonists in an extreme conflict, such as supporters of the Palestinian cause vs. supporters of the Israeli cause. Right now, these groups stand on either side of a fence yelling at each other, which has nothing to do with anything constructive. Anyone out there with experience or conjectures. Thanks for all the generosity I see on the list.

harrison owen, maryland, usa:

I guess the simple answer is -- Just like always. But in super Hi-conflict situations things that are just "useful" under more normal circumstances become absolutely critical. In terms of a theme it must be something that people really care about and not just something "safe." The theme must be broad enough to allow for inclusion and focused enough so that people know why they are coming. I find it useful to look for real hard/gut issues -- something like "Education of our Children" or "fixing roads" --and not something like "Bringing Love to Our land." Voluntary Self-Selection is another "critical" -- if people feel forced to come, a bad situation becomes worse. And if you never quite knew what "holding space" was -- you will find out. It can be a real "white knuckle" trip -- but just hold tight to the arms of a good solid chair, say and do nothing -- just "be" as intensely as you can.

As for Israelis and Palestinians I have no personal experience, though ask me in several weeks and that lack of experience will hopefully have changed. However in other similar situations I have found that at the end of the day people are people, and Open Space is open space.

bernhard weber, austria and mozambique:

Since there is this rich ongoing discussion on mediation/conflict resolution and OS taking place in the oslist, Michael Pannwitz told me it would be good to pass the following information on to the os-list, which had been my answer to a question in the "schneller wandel"(simultaneous change) list:

Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna in Pisa offers high quality training in political mediation at international level. The mix of participants from many countries and different levels of intervention is usually very interesting. Scuola Sant'Anna offer also actual and tailor made products (e.g. peace-keeping-training for Afghanistan)

Their website: http://www.itp.sssup.it
Contact: Ms Barbara Mancini, Pisa, Italy -- tel +39 050 883 312 fax +39 050 883 506

bernhard again...

Michaël Molenaar just told me that the link I gave is actually not working. I tried again and it seems that the server is down. Sorry!   So if you are interested please try the following alternatives

http://www.reliefweb.int/training/t289.html (Int'l Training Programme for Conflict Management)
http://www.reliefweb.int/training/t142.html (general description of training activities)
http://www.reliefweb.int/training/ti429.html (july course)
http://www.reliefweb.int/training/ti796.html (Afghanistan)

Organization contact(s): Gabriella Arcadu, International Training Programme for Conflict Management, Pisa, Italy, mailto:garcadu@sssup.it

A good general starting point for looking up conflict management & mediation trainings at international level is the site HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE TRAINING INVENTORY: http://www.reliefweb.int/training/orgs.html

harrison owen, maryland, usa:

For me there are indeed lessons here -- and by no means have they all been figured out. But it could be a very useful and exciting project, given the state of the world. At the risk of misunderstanding and appearing as a bomb-throwing revolutionary in the halls of conflict mediators -- maybe the first thing we need to do is stop trying to resolve conflict? I am by no means suggesting that we simply stand aside and cheer the combatants onwards. That tends to get bloody, and if for no other reason than pure self interest, the thought is not a wise one. After all, the blood could eventually be our own. But I find certain considerations suggestive of an alternate approach.

First, conflict, in and of itself is not necessarily a bad thing. It shows that people care about something, they have some passion. Approaches that resolve the conflict by eliminating the passion remove precisely the ingredient of constructive change. Nothing will be different until people care to make it different.

Second, when people are in conflict, the issues and inter-relationships are so incredibly complex that I as an "outsider" don't have a prayer of understanding the true dimensions of what is going

on. Which means for me that the possibility of developing a rational process to straighten out the mess is a nice idea, but beyond the realm of possibility. Of course, those with the necessary knowledge are so close to the "problem" that they often can't see the forest for the trees.

Thirdly, the critical piece for me (as a potential peace bringer) is not the conflict or the issues but rather the necessary space in which the parties can separate long enough to see new options. Presuming that they care about some meaningful life, and are generally opposed to killing or being killed (literally or figuratively), the folks will figure it out. That is, I believe, the experience of Open Space, or at least it has been my experience -- no matter how high the level of conflict may be. And just to be clear that this is not the exclusive magic of Open Space, I note that some of my legal friends who seem particularly skilled at enabling the resolution of conflict start with a search for what they call "negotiating room." I guess I would call that open space.

Fourth, when the parties at interest have figured out who they are and where they are going, there remain a number of important tasks. Primary is to help them to an awareness of the fact that they did it, combined with a recognition of how they did it. Not in detail, for the details will never be repeated, but in general -- because this recognition will enable them to do it again the next time they find themselves in conflict. And of course there are doubtless a number of "i's" to be dotted and "t's" to be crossed which I find are best done by those with the appropriate skills -- usually the legal eagles. But at the end of the day i think it important to remember that preparation of the necessary documentation (written or otherwise) is not to be confused with conflict resolution. It is "only" a map. And we have had some discussion about maps and territories.

Of course, I guess there are those folks at the far end of the curve who really don't care about issues or their resolution, they just love conflict for reasons that seem to have a lot to do with their own personal power needs. But I find such folks to be in a distinct minority, and they tend to lose their power and impact when the space is genuinely open -- a fact that usually terrifies them. Malignant Space Invaders all.

judi richardson, nova scotia, canada:

I appreciate your words here, Harrison. I have experienced "curmudgins" as holding a key pole position in the process of expanding consciousness. Holding that position so well that others are free to fly — and I often hear from the curmudgins by email after!!

meg salter, ontario canada

I read something interesting recently about the role of parasites (curmudgins) in the process of self-organization/ expansion of consciousness: Parasites force their hosts to evolve an immune system response - to fight off the effect of parasites. (some make it through, some don't.) Then the parasites evolve further to outwit the new immune response - and the host evolves further in self-defense. So - over the long term and large populations - parasites play a critical role in our evolutionary development.

I suspect that the social equivalent of parasites include curmudgins - and other nasty sorts. Tough to deal with, and serve a useful role. It's certainly the way I've been forced to pay attention to things in life - dealing with the tough spots, not the smooth sailing!!

ralph copleman, new jersey, usa:

(Well, we're two biased witnesses talking to each other...) I'm sure you're not the only one with claustrophobic reactions to various interventions. I know that I have experienced them and, no doubt, caused them, too.

It's not only the 18(?) so-called large group interventions I'm referring to. How about therapy or other one-to-one interventions? In my experience, these can thwart as well as free folks. Small group processes face/offer the same challenge. But some of these (individual or group) techniques do open new paths, offer break-through insights, and facilitate new levels of cooperation. And let's not forget meditation.

All kinds of issues face all kinds of people and systems. We need to be thoughtful in our approaches. Of course, for my money, if you can't open a little space for folks, the odds may be against you.

harrison owen, maryland, usa:

Whether we are talking one-to-one therapy or a large group intervention for 1500, I think my question, and therefore the "metric," might still be valid. How much space do we have -- and how much can we create? I remember spending 2 and 1/2 years on the couch(4 days a week) of a classical Freudian analyst. And all I can tell you -- that Dude did create space. The most he ever said was a mildly expressive grunt -- but it did open things up. I found myself wondering what many of my clients seem to wonder -- why was I paying this character $100 an hour for grunts? -- and Hell, I don't even grunt. But that which was purchased (I learned) was not "grunts" -- but space. I needed it. I grew in it, and it was worth every penny. And not incidentally, the experience created a whole mess of space in my wallet.

So back to the original -- How Much Space? Can you stand. Can you create. Can the "client" tolerate? And choose your weapons accordingly. Question: When you said, "And let's not forget meditation." did you really mean mediation?

ralph copleman, new jersey, usa:

Nope: meditation. A real space opener.

kenoli oleari, california, usa:

Space is good and other things, too, like shared intention, engagement, shared attention, being heard, speaking our truth, hearing the truth, acting from integrity, being seen, love, compassion, hope, shared vision, clarity about differences, transformation, opening to new things. Some of these are so important that it is worth using anything we can use to get to them. And sometimes we have to grieve together, too.

peggy holman, washington, usa:

Similar to Ralph and Harrison, I have run screaming (to myself) from the room when observing/participating in several large group interventions that made me feel closed in. At the other end of the spectrum, I had a conversation with someone, a deeply experienced practitioner of another whole system method, who spent a week in Open Space. She wasn't at home in it, spending much of her time in her room. A perfectly valid choice, of course. Did she get value from the experience? No question. Would another "method" with more closely held boundaries allowed her to get even more value? I don't begin to know but believe that it might have.

I think Harrison hit the critical questions with: "How Much Space? Can you stand. Can you create. Can the "client" tolerate? And choose your weapons accordingly."

I recently was given a gift of an image around this that I've found quite helpful. A Buddhist priest attended Spirited Work (a learning community that gathers quarterly in OS). He used an image of hands for holding space.

Actually, here are Master Chang's words: Since I left Whidbey Island, I've constantly thought of OS and its spiritual manifestation in earthly conditionings. It's dawn[ed] on me that we constantly create mental boundaries and then transfigure them into organizational rules, etc., which we call containers. Thus, there are levels upon levels of containers, depending on levels of minds that we have. What OP[OST] methodology attracts me is the way it can facilitate and accommodate multi-levels of containers by very few simple rules of gathering and interaction. The challenge for me in creating an OP[OST] organization is to be able to make available (and to promote) evolutionary & consequential levels of unfoldment ... so one can evolve from "container/2 hands

cupped, facing each other" to "supporter/2 hands open, facing upwards" to "being/handless gesture" ...

I LOVE this picture of hands reflecting the evolution of space, perhaps because it mirrors my own growing comfort with space. (While I aspire to it, I'm not sure I'm ready to hang out in the space of "look ma, no hands!") It reminds me that we are all at different places of comfort with openness. I may go screaming from the room when the space feels too closed and someone else go running to their room because the space is too open.

Ain't our diversity great?

kenoli oleari, california, usa:

And what is space and what is a boundary or container? Whether we fall into a group out of the "marketplace", as a result of an assigned group with a task, by attending a workshop or training, or even at a lecture or organized discussion, the experience can feel exapansive, contractive, bounded or unbounded. I suspect it is not the external structure that creates the experience, but more the intention, the energy and the quality of engagement. I think that what we have found is that as we clarify and expand our goals and realize that the possibilities are way beyond what we have come to expect, that process and structure arises to begin to manifest those possibilities. When we reach for transformation it becomes a possibility. As we seek self-organization, tools for supporting this arise. When we envision change at a "systems" level this becomes an option. I suspect that as we expand our perceptions, the possibilities arise to meet them, as we dare to accomplish what has only been a dream we discover the means to approach that dream. We often then get distracted thinking the means we have used to get to a new plateau is the end we set out to achieve. And we have to keep re-discovering the possibilities and moving from the known into the unknown. And discovering and re-discovering old paths.

peggy holman, washington, usa:

Amen. To paraphrase that old thing about students being ready and teachers appearing: When there is inspiration and aspiration, the methods will show up.

glory ressler, ontario, canada:

Well, well.... A lovely chat, to be sure... I especially appreciated the dance metaphor - I/we am/are a dynamic interplay of current, limited, physical manifestation and pure potentiality... and the mathematical equations... and the free will / self-organization thread.... and...

By virtue of our being here, we are self-organized. Everything that is has self-organized. If we hadn't, we wouldn't be here - evolutionarily speaking. if we don't successfully self-organize in response to environmental disturbances, we become extinct. In fact, we carry the self-organizing

cellular memory of all that has been before us. It is also useful to think of a continuum... which for me is spiral rather than linear.

And there is an important distinction between self-organization and conscious self-organization. To consciously do so is to know, in each moment, that you have co-created the conditions you are currently experiencing. In some way. To exercise control whilst you claim not to be doing so and to exercise control, in awareness and authenticity, are two different animals. Like dreaming and lucid dreaming. Self-organizing and consciously self-organizing. Self-organizing and free will - choice implies knowing what we have to choose from.

The hitch comes because we attach an interjected judgement on what we 'should' or 'should not' be doing. Control is not inherently a bad thing. We have internal control in terms of how we choose to respond. It's when we attempt to control external things that we run into trouble.

Also, to see the utility and wisdom, honestly, in all that we are presently believing and doing AND also to have a call or longing for something beyond the present is to interpersonal and intrapersonal psychology what the necessary tension and interaction between fields is to complexity theory.

Open Space Technology is absolutely and by far the best living experiment, I know of, in social-self-organizing. The consciousness comes via the format and principles and one law. When enough of us (critical mass) learn to individually consciously self-organize then we will begin the journey into collective intelligence and conscious collective self-organization. Then we'll really be at play in the field of co-creative meaning and manifestation! The question for me is, What will the quality of this be? And this takes me back to the conscious self-organization (meaning, values and quality making) of my own experience.

Thanks to you all! I'm enriched by your perspectives....

Phoenix Rising

harrison owen, maryland, usa:

In the wake of 911 it occurred to me that the new reality (or the old reality seen with new eyes) might possibly provide the opportunity to take a few large steps in the direction of truly enhanced organizational effectiveness. Not for everybody or all organizations -- but for those who care to take a leap, having perceived that their present circumstances were less than ideal. The result of my reflections was the following proposal which became the basis for a marvelous gathering of 25 here in Washington. Our discussions were rich indeed. They also appear to be ongoing. I share all this with you good folks on the LIST in the hope that it might tickle your fancy. I would love your reactions and thoughts, and should you care to try the approach suggested (it is by no means proprietary) I would love to know how it goes. On one level there is nothing new here -- in one way or another it is what we have all been thinking and doing. What is new (I think) is the directness of approach. I tried it out with several potential clients, and am pleased to say that one (a good sized corporation) has apparently come on board. I say "apparently" because agreement and follow-through can be two very different things. Anyhow, some thoughts for the new year. And Happy New Year everybody! Harrison

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Phoenix Rising A Proposal October, 2001

Harrison Owen

A proposal to enable the transformation of organizations from their present state to what Dee Hock has called a Chaordic Organization, and what I have called an InterActive Organization. Under either name (or a new one) the reality pointed to is that of a conscious self-organizing system which knows itself, its environment and its prospects – and optimizes all of them.

Background and Presuppositions
The events of 911 have re-contexted, if not totally changed, the world in which all organizations do business. Heightened levels of security, restricted travel, altered relationships with customers and suppliers, employee shock – all combine to produce a new and constricted environment. Add in massive economic dislocation to say nothing of down-turn and we have a very challenging situation.

The immediate response is predictably a very conservative one. Conserve cash, energy, and all other resources, and indeed this is just what is happening, as we watch massive layoffs, with more doubtless to come. The conservative response is not only predictable, but probably necessary, but as a continuing solution to the present dilemma it will not be effective.

Effective alternatives will require ways of doing business that are efficient and effective in the extreme. We are not talking incremental movement, but something approaching quantum leaps. And these new ways cannot be draconian in nature, a 21st century version of the sweatshop.

Humanitarian considerations aside, common sense, to say nothing of massive amounts of experience, tells us that stressed out, over-worked people do not make it over time, and equally importantly, they lack the essential characteristic for the moment: agility. As difficult as things may be at the moment, it is absolutely guaranteed that they will change, and change, and change. What works now will fail soon. Lightening fast adaptation to emergent conditions will spell the difference between survival and less pleasant alternatives.

The Power of Self-Organization and a New Way of Doing Business

Self-organizing systems have been around for ever, probably since the moment of the Big Bang. It is only recently that we have begun to understand their function and power, and even more recently – that human systems, like all systems, are basically self-organizing. This later notion is perceived as heretical in many (most) quarters if only because it flies in the face of virtually all organizational theory and practice. However, it is a testable hypothesis, and I believe there is substantial evidence to support it. If this is true (or to the extent that it is true) we have some good news indeed. Based upon the 15 year ongoing, natural experiment with Open Space Technology with thousands of iterations in a myriad of circumstances, I would definitely agree with Johann Paulsen who recently mailed me that, "OST is the most potent 'tool' to apply the principles of complex adaptive systems in an organizational context!" And the news is even better in detail. We know as a matter of experience that enormously complex (sometimes very technical) issues can effectively be dealt with quickly, sometimes amazingly quickly. And while the substantive output may be impressive, I am even more impressed with the "softer side of things." Leadership appears without training, personal empowerment is a common experience, productive teams the norm, and diversity is appreciated as a resource and not a problem. Learning often occurs at lightspeed, genuine community manifests, and best of all, people have fun. There is High Play in abundance. In short, the common experience in Open Space is exactly the sort of thing required by our present circumstances: Super efficient and effective organization which does not achieve these characteristics in a sweatshop environment.

Of course this is just "Open Space" which is usually a time limited event, and not necessarily to be confused with an on-going organization. But this, I think, is to put the cart before the horse, so to speak. The issue is not the magic of the methodology, but rather the power of the pre-existing reality – self-organizing systems. All Open Space does is to introduce us to what is going on anyhow.

While the Open Space experiment was under way, another experiment was also taking place, and it too was a natural one – which means nobody set it up intentionally, but we have sure learned a great deal from it. This is Dee Hock's experience with Visa International, to which he has now attached the glorious title, Chaordic Organization.

I believe, and I think most would agree, that what Hock is talking about is, once again, Self-organizing systems. It is interesting to note how (apparently) it all came about. It wasn't planed, it wasn't intended, and it certainly wasn't designed. But somehow, in some way – and probably in spite of the best efforts to the contrary – the system did it all by itself. Totally remarkable when seen from the point of view of "standard" organizational theory and practice. And totally predictable when seen in the light of what we now know about self-organization.

Now it seems that everybody (or at least a lot of somebodies) wants to be a Chaoridic Organization. And for good reason: They work. It is interesting to note, however, how folks are going about doing this. A presentation at a recent ODN gathering offered to enlighten participants on How To Organize Self-Organizing Systems. And based on some unsubstantiated gossip, I understand the Dee Hock is traveling a similar road. With his notoriety as the inventor of Chaordic Organizations it is reasonable that a number of people would like to benefit from his experience. And he is attempting to oblige. However, as I understand it, the success rate to this point in time has been zero. I do not have the details, but I believe he has started with the "traditionals" – Clear Mission, Goals ... etc. etc. Sounds an awful lot like trying to organize a self-organizing system. His heart is definitely in the right place. However, I think we can do it better.

The Program

Reduced to basics, the critical issues are how to start up a self-organizing system, (or start it up again if stopped or damaged) and to sustain it over time. With regard to the later (sustenance) I refer you to Part IV of my book cited above, where I have outlined practical approaches to maintaining effective communication and coordination, as well as the deeper task of sustaining the focus (mission) and values of the operation. The tools are familiar: InterNet and the organizational mythology.

Start-up or Re-start is a job well performed by Open Space Technology. It has become clear that the "magic" of Open Space is that we unintentionally stumbled upon the essential preconditions for self-organization. In short it is no "magic" at all – simply what all of us do, all of the time whether we like it or not, even if we are totally unconscious of our actions. Nothing new, simply a blinding flash of the obvious.

But obviously the obvious is not all that obvious to all. In fact the majority of present organizational activities (managerial and executive) are premised upon the notion that somebody has to be in control, and that organization happens only when we design, create and control it. After all, what are we being paid for?

And there is the rub. Much of what happens in a well functioning self-organizing system (as also in an Open Space event) is perceived as being counterintuitive at best and probably impossible – even illegal, immoral and fattening. So why would anybody want to go there? The answer is simple one: It works. Not only does it work in substantive terms, but the results are achieved (typically) in a fraction of the "usual" time and with minimal stress and strain. Clearly one can continue to do business as usual based on the traditional model of command and control – that works too, but in a hugely sub-optimal fashion.

When the stakes are high enough and the time available short enough – impossible alternatives become acceptable, which has been our experience globally with Open Space. Possibly 10,000 organizations and groups around the world have chosen to do what most would call impossible. In short there is a track record.

The Core of The Program

The core of the program is less about creating the conditions for self-organization and sustaining them over time than about enabling current executives and managers to be comfortable and competent with all of the above. And whatever we do, it must be congruent with the painful constraints of the moment, to say nothing of a wildly turbulent environment. In short it must be fast, economical, and effective – which not incidentally – is precisely our experience with Open Space. There is a natural rhythm to the proposed undertaking: Open Space, Reflection, Improvement, Open more Space strategically...

Opening Space: Initiating/re-starting self-organization is the easy part. It always works, and the results are predictable, if not in detail then certainly at the grosser levels of group performance and production. In a word there is immediate return on the investment – no training necessary, no planning required. The good news is, any concerned group can quickly become what it already is, a self-organizing system. Best of all, the benefits are concrete and almost immediate: new products, resolution of thorny issues, new and expanded bodies of knowledge, in addition to a great bunch of "fringe benefits." The major problem is that things happen so fast and appear so natural (easy) that many, perhaps most, people simply do not realize what has gone on. Which means, unfortunately that they are less likely to do it again and do it better.

Reflection: Reflection need not be a major time consumer for the objective is simply to acknowledge and anchor the experience. This is not about reviewing the substantive outcomes, but rather a consideration of how we did what we did with the thought that next time around we might do it better – or all the time.

Improvement: I suppose this might look a lot like a "training program" but it is radical, experiential learning. Concepts may be useful, but the experience is primary. Thus the group may have noticed that Leadership in a self-organizing system was emergent and effective. Definitely good news, which raises the question – how do we do it better and more consciously? And then some bad news appears. Turns out that positional power is not only absent, but when present (a holdover from the ancient regime) it gets in the way and generally mucks things up. Worse, effective leadership seems to have a lot to do with Letting Go and forgetting about Span of Control, Lines of Authority, Direct Reports – all those things dear to the heart and ego of most of us. It would appear that some attitude adjustment, might we say Coaching, would be in order.

And there are a few other dis-comforting things that may come to view. For example, at any given time a person may be leader and follower in multiple groups. So how should we handle compensation and benefits? Or – it appears that innovation and application can occur very rapidly and not on a pre-existing schedule. So how do we handle Planning and Accounting? Clearly we do not want to discard a real money maker because it is not in The Plan (and I've seen that done) nor do we want to loose the money because our Financial System is so rigid that

we can't book it. It appears that the new (old) reality requires the best attention of folks from Human Resources and Finance – not to do the same old thing, but to utilize their considerable talents in support of productive work as it is actually taking place.

Strategic Self-Organization: Self-organization is something that happens quite naturally, without our assistance. At the same time we may become more fully conscious of the process and learn to ride the waves of our lives with greater competence. The reference to "waves" is not happenstance, for I believe conscious life in self-organization has a lot to do with surfing. The surfer does not create the waves, but he/she can learn to recognize a good one. Technique matters, experience counts, and good equipment won't hurt. Helping organizations to realize and practice Strategic Self-Organization is the top of the mountain. It begins with first steps, as in Opening Space, Reflection and then Improvement – but the whole is more than the sum of the parts, and the journey is more than the sum of the steps. This is going "meta" to the whole affair. Everybody is surely capable of doing all this at some level, but those who's view encompasses the highest levels will surely be in a position to contribute mightily to their organization's future. I think we can get them there.

robert chaffe, victoria, australia:

Harrison, Thanks for the copy of your long proposal. It does seem rather complex and I wonder if we need to follow this path to win the job? A self organising system, learning organisations, etc. are all constructs that we use to describe the reality in an organisation that works and is sustainable. Somehow we need to find a way of allowing the client to discover their own words to describe their organisation and keep the Jargon for our own use.

Just as when we trip and fall most of us welcome the hand that helps us up and then lets us get on with what we know best to do. As has been said may different ways over the past months the way forward is with LIGHT and LOVE. I think that what open space technology does is provide a process that allows the participants to reconnect to the their lives and discover the LIGHT for themselves while surrounded by LOVE (SPIRIT and all the other words we use from time to time).

Every time I start to give long responses to what Open Space is or can do I am reminded of the words from South Pacific "Fools give you reasons, wise men never try!"

For the business we could ask. "Do you want to make the best of the current opportunities to grow your business?" " Do you want to make the best use of the resources of your business?" "Do you want your staff totally committed new business plans and actions?" "Are you prepared to work with your staff to create a new business that is better than what any of you thought possible?"

 If the answer is yes to any or all of these questions then Open Space can help. (Fill in the examples of success). The only question left is, "When do we start?"

harrison owen, maryland, usa:

> *Robert Chaffe wrote: A self organising system, learning organisations, etc. are all constructs that we use to describe the reality in an organisation that works and is sustainable. Somehow we need to find a way of allowing the client to discover their own words to describe their organisation and keep the Jargon for our own use.*

Absolutely correct, in my view. Simple is best. And when dealing with a client it is essential to start with the language, thought forms, mythology and ideology of the client. Further, it has been my experience that all clients (read all people that I have met) are "already there." Some while back, there was a lot of conversation about bringing Spirit to Business. My response what that was sort of Carrying Coals to Newcastle. A waste of time. What was not a waste of time, however, was enabling the client (person, people) to recognize and enhance what they already had/were. Call it Helping them to grow their Now. Every time we open space with a client, I think we make a start at that process, but I don't think that is the end of the process. To the extent that people perceive their Open Space experiences as "only" a better, more productive meeting (which it certainly is) they are only skimming the surface to their disadvantage. However, at the end of the day, they must see their own depths in their own terms. To help them do this -- if they want the help -- I find it useful to have critically considered what those depths might look like -- which means for me going to my own depths and engaging in a process of critical thought and reflection, which almost inevitably generates some language (aka "jargon"). Insisting that they use my jargon, however, is not helpful.

> *Every time I start to give long responses to what Open Space is or can do I am reminded of the words from South Pacific "Fools give you reasons, wise men never try!"*
>
> *For the business we could ask.:*
> *"Do you want to make the best of the current opportunities to grow your business?"*
> *"Do you want to make the best use of the resources of your business?"*
> *"Do you want your staff totally committed new business plans and actions?"*
> *"Are you prepared to work with your staff to create a new business that is better than what any of you thought possible?"*

My experience exactly. I suppose if I have a mantra it is Don't sell (explain) Open Space -- Do it! Don't talk about the method, theory, esoterica of Open Space, talk about results. All true. And then there is more... Leadership appears in new ways. Acknowledge that and go deeper. Community appears in new ways. Recognize that and go deeper. Compensation (pay checks) must come in some new packages. Think about that and go deeper. Accounting systems serve a closed system way of being in organization. A self organizing system, which manifests in Open Space, has a different metric. What is that????

To be sure, things get a little complicated, and we certainly could get buried in arcane esoterica, to say nothing of mind-boggling jargon, but we have a secret weapon. Just open some more space, and let the fresh air in. But I don't think we can do our job and also avoid the complexities. Sort of comes with the territory.

Self- Healing in Communities

harrison owen, maryland, usa:

Julie Smith and I (with able assistance from others) have been engaged in a conversation about Mediation and Open Space in which it may have seemed that I was trying to champion Open Space at the expense of Mediation. Assuming this to be the case, Julie replied appropriately --

> *A glimmer of understanding on my horizon now….. it isn't authentic, Harrison, for you to interact with groups in ways that require more words or technique or reliance on you as a facilitator/leader. What is authentic for you is to express trust in their ability to find their own answers, and to help by holding space with them. What that "holding space" is, is a manifestation of Spirit at work in you, co-creating with them an energy of creativity, good will, and unbounded possibility. Having experienced this so many times, it is inconceivable to you to respond to requests for a lesser experience. Your inner wisdom resists being and doing less than you are capable of. As for the rest of us, we also have to find what is authentic for us. Authenticity isn't something that can be transferred. We each have to look inside and find what is authentic for us. My understanding of OS is that it encourages each of us to authentically express our true selves, unbounded by artificial boundaries or expectations.*

My error, Julie. Truth be told, I can be very direct, and directive -- if I think it is appropriate, or as is sometimes the case, I simply loose patience. In either case, I guess I am being "authentic" if that means allowing my walk and my talk to match my inner state of being. All of which is a rather long winded way of saying that the issue of concern for me is not about "authenticity" or "one right way" -- but hopefully something deeper. I think you caught my intent amongst the verbiage when you said --

> *I'm interested in your thought about enhancing self-healing in our communities….. and wonder what the difference is between self-healing and healing….. but my brain is tired and my stomach oh so empty…… don't you serve food at these OS events?????*

Snacks will be served shortly -- but in the meantime...

Self-Healing in our Communities (You like that red?)

My premise in all this is that (surprise) all organizations (communities) are essentially self-organizing AND -- a (maybe THE) central purpose of self-organization is the achievement of wholeness, health, harmony, and I suppose authenticity and integrity, in such situations where the organization is at risk due to changing internal or external environmental circumstances. The process is enormously complex in detailed execution, but very simple at the point of initiation. Given a good whack to the head, chaos clears some space in which high levels of complexity, diversity and conflict manifest and conspire enabling the appearance of renewed organization (or not). Sometimes things just die, but if they don't, life goes on in some new and useful ways

displaying wholeness, health and harmony, all congruent with the changed environment. In broad terms, I think that is what organizations do, and typically they do it all by themselves. To be sure, we sometimes (erroneously, I think) give all the credit to some individual -- the "Turn around specialist as it were" -- but in truth, We all did it. Experimentally, and also experientially, I think we see this each time we Open Space, but I think it is imperative to note that the essential power does not belong to that wonderful thing called Open Space Technology, but rather to the process of self-organization itself. What we do with open Space is to intentionally initiate (or re-start) that fundamental process.

Switching metaphors from organizations to organisms, one of the interesting things that I learned several years ago when I held a position at the National Institutes of Health was that something like 95% of all disease lies beyond the power of medicine to do anything useful. People either get better or they don't. This was rather a shock to those of us at the citadel of science, but that seemed to be the case although we tried our best at times to forget it. What this suggests is that the best treatment in the vast majority of situations was no treatment. Next best was as little treatment as you could decently get away with, if only because it seems that any treatment has added liabilities of its own. Even though an intervention may deal with the symptoms, it may also impede that natural healing process -- the process of self-organization in our bodies.

Of course, we do have that other 5% -- which includes such things as organ failure and major trauma. There are definitely times and places, to say nothing of circumstances where only a good surgeon will do. However, I think we would all agree that surgery is a matter of last resort and best done as sparingly as possible. Of course, I know some surgeons who would disagree -- but when the only tool you have is a hammer, all the world looks surprisingly like a nail. No -- I never said a thing like that!

And what about Self-Healing Organizations? I suggest that all organizations are self-healing just as they are self-organizing. Which means in the first instance that for the vast majority of nasty little surprises in life, the organization will do just fine all by itself, and the professional problem fixers of this world (which includes most of us) should just sit on their hands for a bit. As they say up in the Great State of Maine, "Don't fix it if it ain't broke." Of course, things will go better with a little preventive care. I am sure we could add to the list here, but the first part of prevention, I think, is a clear understanding of the nature of the beast. Organizations are essentially and inherently self-organizing systems (organic, open, living self-organizing systems), and need to be treated as such. They are not auto engines needing a tune-up, they are not computer systems needing de-bugging, they are not rockets needing guidance systems. They are alive, and work best when everybody is conscious of their nature. Like all living things, they need a proper diet, light on the heavy hand of control, lots of fresh air and space to grow in. When things get a little musty and old, just open a window and create some space. You don't have to sit in a circle, nice as that might be.

Sometimes, however, you do get down to terminal mustiness and the arteries of discourse get pretty plugged, backed up and conflicted. But before going for an organizational triple bypass (although the surgical types would love it) -- Try a little Open Space (as in OST). It isn't new, it isn't magic -- it simply provides a gentle nudge to allow the organization to do what it does quite

naturally -- breath. But always remember, less is best. Don't reach for a respirator when just a little smelling salts will do, as in getting a strong whiff of passion well mixed with responsibility.

So is this a sneak attack on Mediators, dressed up in surgical attire? Well, I guess there may be a few such folks who might qualify, but much higher on my list would be those awesome practitioners of Process Re-Engineering. Tear out the pipes, relay the cable, all according to The Plan. And when it doesn't work, just make sure you get out of town before the funeral. Now that is nasty! But the Mediators I know, and I know (and deeply respect) more than a few, know all about space, creating space, holding the moment, minimalist to an extreme. Truthfully, at a deep level, I have a very hard job distinguishing what they do from what I (wearing my OST hat) do -- except that I seem to work with more people at one time.

So -- Julie. It is probably time for dinner, and the conversation can continue over brandy and cigars. Oh -- we don't do cigars any more. :-(

chris corrigan, british columbia, canada:

I have written before of OST as triggering healing from the colonial experience for the First Nations and Aboriginal groups I work with. This is due to a number of reasons (I think, but who can do primary research whilst opening space?):

• OST somehow triggers the use of the "indigenous mind" whatever that   is. Something to do with the circle, something to do with honoring   the inherent and innate wisdom of everyone in the room.

• OST restores faith in people, and says "you are all experts, and no   one can tell you what is true and what is not. Your authority   (both power and the ability to create a story) resides within you,   not within the Great White Father" This is a serious blow against   the colonial experience of many Aboriginal people who have been   conditioned over generations to believe that the Aboriginal story   is not true, that the experts are the settlers, and that what is   right is European.

• OST provides space for people to grieve, find support and reframe   their experience. If it acknowledges that wisdom is in the room,   it also acknowledges that, as Birgitt says grief is always in the   room. I have seen people in OST meetings revisit traumas in their   lives, find support and move on, with the predictable results of   euphoria and joy. OST is not therapy but it also does not recreate   the conditions of colonialism, where the teacher stands at the   front of the room and mediates (in the sense of standing in the way   and filtering) experiences.

• Elders tell me that OST is "how we used to meet" meaning not that   it is an Aboriginal way of meeting, but that it is a deeply   traditional, pre-colonial quality of experience. Elders love Open Space in my experience.

What I have learned about healing the wounds of colonialism for our communities through using OST, is that a process can unlock skills and talents that are latent and even suppressed. Of course

this comes as no surprise after a while, but is is a powerful occurrence to see people on the margins of mainstream society rediscover their own centres, and recognize that the path forward starts with them.

In Canada, all the talk in the First Nations world is about self-government, but only now are people beginning to realize the profound implications of the word "self."   OST opens them to the Self that can Govern and they discover that Spirit is the lubricant for the healing engine.

> *Harrison wrote: Of course, we do have that other 5% -- which includes such things as organ failure and major trauma. There are definitely times and places, to say nothing of circumstances where only a good surgeon will do. However, I think we would all agree that surgery is a matter of last resort and best done as sparingly as possible. Of course, I know some surgeons who would disagree -- but when the only tool you have is a hammer, all the world looks surprisingly like a nail. No -- I never said a thing like that!*

When a patient is on life support, or in need of immediate assistance to stem trauma, that person needs outside help, in the form of some kind of technology, to stay alive. To heal however, the patient needs only itself. If the trauma facing the patient is less serious than the patient's capacity to deal with it, then the patient will heal. Scars will remain, but the healing will happen. If the patient lacks the capacity to heal, the healing won't happen. Surgeons can help stem the depletion of capacity, but they can't heal.

I think people confronted with serious illnesses often find that they have far more capacity to heal than they thought they did. I think the same is true for organizations and communities too.

> *And what about Self-Healing Organizations? I suggest that all organizations are self-healing just as they are self-organizing. Which means in the first instance that for the vast majority of nasty little surprises in life, the organization will do just fine all by itself, and the professional problem fixers of this world (which includes most of us) should just sit on their hands for a bit. As they say up in the Great State of Maine, "Don't fix it if it ain't broke."*

It could be added to this that sometimes if a thing is broken it's not worth "fixing" either. Sometimes healing means taking a whole new approach on something. I think education reform is a case in point. Education in North America is broken, and the subject of a myriad of fixes, all of which seem to compound the problem. THe point is, is it worth fixing this thing? Or can we get to the place we want to go another way. When people end up saying "YES WE CAN!" they end up beginning the healing. Read Ivan Illich "Deschooling Society" to see what I mean.

My experience of OST is that, by allowing Spirit into the situation, sometimes broken things stay that way, and instead new configurations arise. This is a much better expenditure of energy.

There is probably more to say in what Harrison and Julie have been expounding upon in terms of processes and interventions, but I'll stick to healing in the interests of running one thread at a time.

julie smith, alaska, usa:

Just one last thing as we're walking to the dining room…..Maybe mediation isn't quite so much like surgery after all. After all, mediators don't fix things. We don't view ourselves as Experts with Answers. We don't give advice.

Being a mediator might be more like being a friend. A friend who can tolerate the tension and ambiguity of being friend to you AND other, even when you and other are in conflict. A friend who believes in the possibility of unity in spite of the separation manifested in the conflict. A friend who holds safe and open space. A friend who listens. A friend who speaks. :) …..Okay, I'm ready for that glass of wine now.

harrison owen, maryland, usa:

> *Julie wrote: Just one last thing as we re walking to the dining room.... Maybe mediation isn't quite so much like surgery after all. After all, mediators don t fix things. We don t view ourselves as Experts with Answers. We don t give advice.*

Total Agreement -- quoth me -- "But the Mediators I know, and I know (and deeply respect) more than a few, know all about space, creating space, holding the moment, minimalist to an extreme. Truthfully, at a deep level, I have a very hard job distinguishing what they do from what I (wearing my OST hat) do -- except that I seem to work with more people at one time."

> *Being a mediator might be more like being a friend. A friend who can tolerate the tension and ambiguity of being friend to you AND other, even when you and other are in conflict. A friend who believes in the possibility of unity in spite of the separation manifested in the conflict. A friend who holds safe and open space. A friend who listens. A friend who speaks. :)*

YES!!!!

> *&..Okay, I m ready for that glass of wine now.*

Myself. And May I pour? And How about a cigar????

judi richardson, nova scotia, canada:

Very interesting conversation on mediation and open space. As a practitioner of both, my exploration of Open Space facilitation has enhanced mediation, and vice versa. I appreciate Harrison's comments on upper management who refuse to get involved.

Often during a mediation session it becomes clear that authority outside the room needs to be involved as the dispute is not about the people in the room. A session can be stopped while management is made aware, or can proceed with notes reflecting the issue in the mediated agreement. I know I've done my best work as a mediator when I hear people ask what I was there for -- similar to Open Space facilitation.

Philosophically it is a challenging question on whether to work with individuals when management prides itself on inactivity. I have often watched participants in a mediation become aware of themselves as individuals and as part of a collective. Seeing a change in themselves, and even a small amount of support for this change allows (as Kenoli states) "an expansion of perceptions and then possibilities can arise to meet them."

I have also worked with children from the 4th grade on up in peer mediation and watch their growth with interest. Yes, they face those educators who refuse to acknowledge their talent at solving their own conflict, critical analysis, and advocacy. At times I've wondered if I am only supporting them in setting themselves up to fail. There is, however, an unmistakable spark ......

Mediation, for me, has been a tool to provide a container where those in conflict can regain their dignity and work together. When I began to learn the process ⁻ I initially paid more attention to the process than the people. As I quickly integrated those tools and made them mine, I find a very thin line between them. Open Space has definitely improved my mediation practice. I also study and integrate into my practice (read life) indigenous forms of restorative justice, which also seem like a bridge between mediation and Open Space. All members of a "community of harm" are invited into the circle and have input. Like mediation and Open Space there is a process to follow, and self-healing happens.

The word that jumps out for me is "invitation". Mediation is most successful when participation is voluntary. In many mediation sessions, a senior manager or team leader has recommended mediation ⁻ can this be considered voluntary? In my experience, there are those in mediation and facilitation who seem to apply a parental model ⁻ the mediator as all-knowing parent.

And, Harrison, as a parent of children approaching adulthood your comment "Think of one more thing NOT to do" is a great one --thanks. I keep reminding myself that the less I try to fix them, the more magnificent they are!

A Blessing

chris corrigan, british columbia, canada:

Happy New Year folks. You remember Aine, my daughter. In September she said something about feeding monsters that, along with the profound collective forwarding power of the folks on this list, turned her into an international celebrity (http://www.chriscorrigan.com/aine). Well, she's back, with a repeat utterance of truth and clarity that shook me to my socks.

As we were gathering around our dining room table for the last meal of last year, adorned as it is by a little Siberian silk painting that Elena left there in August, we were giving thanks for all that was important to us and that had happened in 2001.

Aine usually primes herself for these sorts of instantaneous essays by uttering her usual beginning: "Thank you for the love, for the trees, for the rocks..." She uses those words to get going and fill time while she dreams up the main event. Being a 4.5 year old jazz musician, she needs to prime the improvisational genius with a ritual recital of the head.

So, after her standard vamp on the usual themes, she paused, a pregnant opening that actually presaged what she was about to say, and said very simply:

"Thank you space, for everything."

 It was a statement that works of so many levels, that I am still reeling from its significance.

Anyway, I offer it to all of you in the dark northern early days of 2002, as a kind of blessing/thank you for all that you, as a community, continue to be.

"Thank you space, for everything."

APPENDIX A: OSLIST FAQ List

This FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) has been prepared to outline some of the "givens" around the OSLIST, the online list for Open Space Technology practitioners. This FAQ does not represent the official position of the OSLIST membership, but rather, is the result of observation and participation by a few list members who had the passion to create a FAQ.

1. What is Open Space Technology?

You'd be surprised how contentious an question that one can be. Over the years on OSLIST list members have gone through spells of defining Open Space Technology both explicitly and implicitly. In fact one of the benefits of being subscribed to this list is that over time a definition that makes sense will emerge for each individual.

Having said that, in 2000 a group of list members wrestled with the challenge of crafting an Open Space Technology definition that was 25 words or less, and among the results were the following:

"Open Space is based in the belief that organizations and communities run on passion and responsibility. It allows groups of any size to self-organize around what they really care about to get things done." -- Peg Holman

"Open Space Technology is a natural communication process that recognizes that people take responsibility to pursue what they are passionate about, and it ensures that what is important to each participant will be discussed." -- developed by a small group during Birgitt Williams' Open Space training workshop in Halifax May 15-18, 2000

That is the short answer. How this happens is the interesting part.

Open Space Technology meetings begin with all the participants sitting in a circle, and no items on the agenda. The meeting opens with an agenda setting exercise following which the group self-organizes into smaller discussion groups. Discussion group conveners are responsible for providing a report of the discussions, which is immediately added to a book of proceedings. At the conclusion of the meeting, or

very shortly thereafter, participants receive a copy of the proceedings including all of the discussion groups' reports and any action plans that were developed.

Open Space Technology meetings operate on four principles and one law. The principles are:

* Whoever comes is the right people
* Whatever happens is the only thing that could have happened
* When it starts is the right time
* When it's over it's over

And the law is known as The Law of Two Feet (sometimes referred to as "The Law of Mobility"). It states that "If you find yourself in a situation where you are neither learning or contributing, go somewhere where you can."

As a result, Open Space Technology meetings are characterized by self-organization and high degrees of freedom for participants.

If you want to know more about Open Space Technology visit the site of the international Open Space Technology community at http://www.openspaceworld.org (a companion site to this list) where you can find an Introduction to OST in many languages and resources and links to other materials about OST on the Web.

For the record, Open Space Technology was developed by Harrison Owen, a Maryland USA based consultant who was searching for a way to create better meetings after hearing that the best parts of a conference he organized were the coffee breaks. Open Space Technology meetings are still known for capturing the "buzz" that permeates the gathering and turning it towards action. Harrison wrote "the book" on Open Space Technology, called "Open Space Technology: A User's Guide" which serves as an important articulation of the mechanics and meaning of the process.

Open Space Technology meetings have been held with groups as large as 1200 and as small as 5.

2. What is OSLIST? How do I change my list settings?

OSLIST is the international mailing list for Open Space Technology facilitators and those interested in the process. It is a lively forum with 367 members (as of

August 1, 2001) and generates around 10-15 messages per day, during its most active times.

To join OSLIST, or to change your settings, visit http://listserv.boisestate.edu/cgi-bin/wa?SUBED1=oslist&A=1 and fill out the form. You may also unsubscribe using this page.

You may also join OSLIST by sending a message to the following address: listserv@listserv.boisestate.edu. IN THE BODY of this message type ONLY the following text: "subscribe oslist" (don't type the quotes!). Enter nothing in the SUBJECT field and nothing else in the message (including, for instance, signatures, addresses, etc.).

To unsubscribe from OSLIST Send a message to listserv@listserv.boisestate.edu. IN THE BODY of this message type ONLY the following text: "unsubscribe oslist" (don't type the quotes!). Enter nothing in the SUBJECT field and nothing else in the message (including, for instance, signatures, addresses, etc.).

Upon successfully registering for the list you will receive a piece of mail containing useful information about OSLIST including how to unsubscribe. It's worthwhile saving this treasure!

If you have any problems, our list moderator is Murli Nagasundaram. He is at murli@boisestate.edu . Murli helps out with any technical issues that need to be resolved with the list, but he does not "moderate" in the traditional sense of filtering messages. All messages posted to the LISTSERV are posted to the list.

3. Is the list archived?

Yes, the list is archived, and all material posted to the list is also posted to the archive. The archive is publicly accessible, so you may wish to keep this in mind if you choose to post to the list.

The archives can be read and searched by visiting http://listserv.boisestate.edu/archives/oslist.html

4. What is the etiquette for posting to OSLIST?

There are no hard and fast rules about what to post to OSLIST, but in general people appreciate the following:

* Questions about working with Open Space Technology
* Answers to relevant questions
* Stories about Open Space Technology meetings
* Poems (there is a regular poetry contest that happens every six months or so)
* Notices of upcoming Open Space Technology training or conferences
* Resource material that may be of interest to Open Space Technology facilitators
* Opportunities and calls for OST facilitators.
* Introductions from new subscribers
* Discussion about theories and ideas that can help to improve the understanding and practice of Open Space Technology
* Experiences working with Open Space Organizations
* Accounts of other ways of "opening space.".
* Posts in languages other than English are acceptable. OSLIST has readers who speak German, Swedish, Russian, Portuguese, Haitian Creole, Spanish and French among others and items have been posted in all of these languages in the past.

In general, OSLIST users seem to prefer that people avoid the following:

* Attachments. Please either post these to a website and provide the link to the list, or ask people to indicate if they wish to receive them off list. Viruses are sent as attachments, and so most people will routinely delete them if they are not sent personally.
* Flaming. We are a pretty congenial group, and flaming is relatively unknown amongst us. It would be nice to keep it that way. If you have negative things to say about individuals it would be appreciated if you could keep them off list.
* Virus warnings. If you absolutely feel the need to post a virus warning to the list please ensure that the warning is not a hoax by first checking with the Symantec AntiVirus Centre at http://www.symantec.com/avcenter/

It must also be said that the jury is still out on small personal notes of appreciation or support to individuals. Some feel that these are a waste of bandwidth and add to an increasingly heavy personal email load. Others feel that personal messages of support sent to the list provide valuable affirmation to individuals by recognizing

them within the worldwide community of Open Space Technology practitioners. It's best to use your own judgment on this. If you do post notes like this to the list, be aware that the reception of others may be mixed.

5. Dealing with viruses

Like all email lists, the OSLIST is vulnerable to viruses being circulated by its members. This does happen from time to time. While there is no fool proof way to stop viruses being sent to the list, there are a couple of things you can do to avoid being affected by viruses. There is an excellent FAQ on dealing with email viruses at http://www.onenw.org/bin/page.cfm?pageid=14 . This includes instructions for making Microsoft Outlook safe.

In addition, OSLIST users have offered the following pieces of advice:

* Never open an attachment from an email sent to the list, even if they come from a source you know and trust. If you are curious about an attachment, ask the sender to send it to you off list.
* Don't use Microsoft Outlook as your email reader. Choose Eudora http://www.eudora.com or some other free mail program instead.
* Use Anti-virus software such as Norton Anti-virus produced by
 Symantec http://enterprisesecurity.symantec.com/content/productlink.cfm#0.

6. What other online discussion forums are there for Open Space Technology practitioners?

The two most heavily visited online forums are as follows:

* Worldwide Open Space at http://www.openspaceworld.org. Registration is free.
* The Meta Network at http://www.tmn.com/new. Follow the link to "make a new account" and fill out the form. Where you are asked for your host or sponsor on The Meta Network enter "Openspace"

7. Where can I find out more about Open Space Technology?

The best place to start is at the Open Space World website which can be found at: http://www.openspaceworld.org. Here you will find resources for facilitators, links to

websites of Open Space Technology practitioners, stories, poetry, training opportunities, conference information and more.

8. What is OSonOS?

OSonOS stands for "Open Space on Open Space." It is an annual event that gathers together 150 or so Open Space Technology practitioners to spend two or more days discussing issues related to the practice of Open Space Technology.

The next OSonOS (OSinOSinOZ) will be held in Melbourne, Australia, November 9-12, 2002. More information about that event can be found at http://www.openspaceworld.org/osonos.html along with links to the proceedings of previous OSonOS events.

9. Does the OSLIST really have a Poet Laureate?

Of course! The title of OSLIST Poet Laureate is awarded to the winner of the Biannual OSLIST Restricted Form Poetry Contest. Anyone may enter this contest, and all list members have an opportunity to vote for the winner. The winner is responsible for organizing the next contest. The current OSLIST Poet Laureate is florian fischer, "open!space facilitator".

Updated December 10, 2001 Please email any additions or changes to Chris Corrigan mailto:chris@chriscorrigan.com

APPENDIX B: Books and Websites Referenced Herein

Thomas Berry, <u>The Great Work</u>

Hugh Brody, <u>Maps and Dreams</u>

Matthew Fox, <u>Meditations with Meister Eckhart</u>

Bert Hellinger, <u>Love's Hidden Symmetry</u>

Bert Hellinger, <u>Acknowledging What Is</u>

Peggy Holman and Tom Devane, <u>The Change Handbook</u>

John Holt, <u>Learning All the Time</u>

Ivan Illich, <u>Deschooling Society</u>

Stuart Kauffman, <u>At Home in the Universe</u>

Harrison Owen, <u>The Power of Spirit: How Organizations Transform</u>

Harrison Owen, <u>Open Space Technology: A User's Guide</u>

May Sarton, <u>The House by the Sea</u>

Meg Wheatley, <u>A Simpler Way</u>

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Worldwide Open Space Community
http://www.openspaceworld.org

Chris Corrigan's website
http://www.chriscorrigan.com

Chris' musings on Hugh Brody's book
http://www.chriscorrigan.com/miscellany/bijournal/01-08-2001.htm

Chris' links to education transformation resources
http://www.chriscorrigan.com/mamasalon.html

Inviting Organization: Evolution is Now and Open Space - an online resource collection
written/edited by Michael Herman http://inviting.michaelherman.com

Conflict Resolution Websites posted by Bernhard Weber
http://www.itp.sssup.it Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna
http://www.reliefweb.int/training/t289.html (Int'l Training Programme for Conflict Management)
http://www.reliefweb.int/training/orgs.html (Int'l Humanitarian Assistance Training Inventory)
http://www.reliefweb.int/training/t142.html (general description of training activities)

http://www.reliefweb.int/training/ti429.html (july course)
http://www.reliefweb.int/training/ti796.html (Afghanistan)
Organization contact(s): Gabriella Arcadu, International Training Programme for Conflict
Management, Pisa, Italy, mailto:garcadu@sssup.it

Fetzer Institute
http://www.fetzer.org

Fast Company interview with Peter Senge
http://www.fastcompany.com/online/24/senge.html.

Bert Hellinger (Organization Constellations)
http://www.hellinger.com

Amy and Arny Mindell
http://www.aamindell.net

Translation of the Hsin Hsin Ming
http://www.spiritwalk.org/hsinhsinming.htm

The WonderTree School
http://www.wondertree.org