

The Millennium  
Organization

Harrison Owen

ABBOTT PUBLISHING  
Potomac, Maryland

## Chapter I

### How We Got to This Place

I am a storyteller. For many people that is not something to be proud of, and scarcely the way to introduce yourself or a serious book. After all, stories are suspect. Have we not all been taught from an early age to never tell stories and always stick to the facts?

Most of what you have heard about stories and storytellers is correct. Literal truth is not strictly adhered to, for the telling of the tale often takes precedence over its veracity. Not only is a good tale well told rarely, if ever, true, it is better than that. In the telling of the tale, the truth is made manifest – not as literal fact and proven theory, but as something deeper. Whether I reach such depths remains to be seen, but that is my intent.

As for the story, it is one I have been working on all my life. With each telling I have made discoveries and revisited some old places. So if we are previously acquainted you will see old friends as well as new faces. If we are newly met, I invite you to enjoy the tale. Where it pleases, make it your own, where it needs help, I invite you to make it better.

*Spirit*, and the ways in which Spirit transforms and manifests as the organizations of our world, is the subject of the tale. This is absolutely not an esoteric inquiry. Unless, in your view, Spirit is always something from another world, never to be encountered where the rubber meets the road in the daily round of commerce, government, and everyday life. That, however, has not been my experience.

For me Spirit is the constant companion, never different from life, but rather the essence of life itself. I am completely at a loss when it comes to a precise definition, but I have never found that to be a problem. When Spirit is up, and the folks are on the move, definition is quite unnecessary, for the power of inspired (literally in-spirited) people hits you right in the face. When Spirit is weak, the results speak for themselves, and no amount of definition is going to make much difference. There is, however, much to be said *about* Spirit, its qualities, characteristics, power, and forms, not as an academic exercise,

but as a precondition to what I believe to be the critical job of caring for Spirit.

Spirit is quintessentially important, a fact recognized by every coach, champion, executive, and leader. Technique is useful, resources important, but without Spirit, these do not amount to a hill of beans. Caring for Spirit, growing the Spirit, enabling Spirit to appear in new and more effective ways, is what it is all about. Or at least, that is what I am all about.

My first attempt to tell this tale exists in unpublished form as a dissertation, written more than 30 years ago. The subject, then as now, was the appearance of Spirit in and through the open space created by the passage of chaos into order, and order into chaos. The material considered was largely biblical, which was fitting, because I was at the time (and still am) an Anglican (Episcopalian) priest. The next edition appeared as *Spirit: Transformation and Development in Organizations*, in which I sought to update my explorations and apply what I had previously discovered to the ongoing life of contemporary organizations. *Spirit* laid out a course of inquiry that has occupied me ever since.

Next came *Leadership Is* in which my concern was to offer a view of leadership that might be effective in a situation where the old notion of ironclad control was quickly disappearing. *Riding the Tiger: Doing Business in a Transforming World* explored

the reality and contribution of chaos in some depth with the help of insights from the newly emerging field of chaos theory. Here I also introduced Open Space Technology as a practical tool for navigating the contemporary organizational environment. Last came *Open Space Technology: A User's Guide*, a practical manual detailing the nuts and bolts of practice, and suggested applications.

It is my hope that this present book will continue, and in some ways complete, whatever contribution I may have made to the care of Spirit in the chaotic and newly ordering environment of the moment. This is not a swan song, nor do I believe the last word on the subject is about to be spoken by me or anybody else. But I do think we are at a critical turning point in the ongoing journey of Spirit's transformation. Even as I write, something very new is being born in our world. The appearance is not without pain and dislocation, for the new creation stands in radical juxtaposition to our old way of being. Those who are unalterably attached to our prior ways are finding the times more than a little difficult. But the opportunities are truly awesome, awaiting only our sensitive realization of the extraordinary possibilities. I call the new arrival, the Millennium Organization.

The Millennium Organization, by whatever name, offers a chance and a choice. But we must take the chance to make the

choice. We may choose to welcome the new arrival or not, although a negative choice freezes us in the present, locked in our perceptions of what organizations are, or may become. Speaking only for myself, that choice is not acceptable. Staying where we are destines us to frustration, disillusionment, and ultimately the destruction of humanity. These are strong words, but as I write, the fires of ethnic madness burn brightly around the world. Bosnia, Somalia, Rwanda are the hot spots of the moment. Who knows where the madness will strike next, but strike it will until we find new and better ways of being together in organization.

My use of the word *organization* may appear strained, for it is not usual to talk about countries, tribes, and businesses under a single heading. For me, however, an organization is two or more people gathered together to accomplish a common purpose. With such a definition it is possible to cover the spectrum from couples to countries. In most cases, I find myself thinking and talking about middlesized organizations such as businesses and institutions, but I suspect there is application in larger and smaller environs.

The name Millennium Organization is unimportant, although it does have a certain ring to it. Nor are the details critical, for as in any breaking story, it is not always apparent what is actually going on. But from where I sit, it is very clear that

something of enormous significance has occurred. What follows may therefore be considered in the nature of a *News Flash*, with *More...* to come.

Of course, it may be just a flash in the pan, mostly smoke and very little substance. My task of the moment is to tell the tale as I am experiencing it .

## Chapter II

# The Future is Now.

Not long ago, words such as these were usually reserved for science fiction. They are now no more than a plain statement of the facts.

In the 1960s, Bob Dylan sang, "The times they are a-changing." It is now quite apparent that Dylan did not know the half of it. The coefficient of change has spun up so radically that virtually all efforts to plot the significant innovations and transformations create graphs that stand on their tails, heading straight up.

Any hope that things will level off and somehow return to "normal" – whatever that was – not only seems far-fetched but probably undesirable. Reducing the speed of our ascent is to invite a crash landing. Like a rocket in flight, speed is essential if we are to remain airborne.

Even the conventional wisdom has gotten this point in terms of the health of our several economies. A static economy creates



neither advantage nor opportunity. It is called stagnant or worse. To be sure, unrestrained growth has its own price, but *no growth* and *no change* are not alternatives. In living organisms, the absence of change and growth is called death.

But if we cannot stop, can we truly afford to go on? Frankly, I don't think we have any choice. The forces driving our transformation are so powerful and omnipresent that escape is unthinkable. Furthermore, these forces lap, modify, and amplify each other, producing a maelstrom of transformation having no obvious beginning, middle, or end. In a word it is nonlinear and therefore defies all efforts at linear analysis. It is complexity twice confounded, changing by the nanosecond, and something radically different than any of our vaunted modern problem-solving techniques were designed to address. To perceive the point, take any major force in our midst, and contemplate the relationship between it and just a few companions.

As a first force, how about the **Advance of Technology**? It would hardly be stretching to suggest that children of two or three have witnessed (though not necessarily been conscious of) more technological change in their very short lifetimes than their great-grandparents did in their total allotted years on Planet Earth. No wonder we are somewhere between blasé and breathless.

This is called **Rising Expectations**, and constitutes another one of the driving forces in our lives. All over the world, we are on the lookout for the Joneses (or maybe it is Singhs, Chens, Yamamotos, or Smiths), desperately afraid that somehow, someday they will get ahead of us. If they have a car, we must have two. If we have a computer, they must have a faster, bigger one. Glitz, glamour, gidgets and gadgets – we want it all now!

All this *wanting* and *having* carries a price. We are doing disastrous things to the habitat here on Spaceship Earth. Let us call this force **Environmental Crisis**.

Things have gotten so bad in my part of the world that it is a common sight to see car bumper stickers saying *Save the Earth*.

Truth to tell, there is hyperbole and hubris in this statement, for Planet Earth is going to do just fine. We, however, may experience some difficulties. Putting it in perspective, the Environmental Crisis is all about *Saving the People*. But that makes it no less serious, certainly to us who are at risk.

Now that we have gotten our priorities straight, it is reasonable to ask: what are we going to do? Fix things of course, but that is much easier said than done. Naturally everybody is

anxious to end the crisis in the environment, though not at the expense of producing a new crisis in the economy. We would rather be fed than dead, or something like that. Unfortunately it turns out that if we continue feeding ourselves (running our economies) as we are currently, there is an extraordinarily high probability that we will kill ourselves through mass toxification. And if not us, then our children. Something is amiss.

It may be that we have forgotten our Greek. Translated literally, *economy* means "house rules." *Ecology*, on the other hand means "house foundation," or better, "the deep structure of the house."

Our house is in miserable shape due in large part to the games we have been playing in the parlor and elsewhere. The foundation has cracked, the roof is leaking acid rain, and the walls are letting in unwanted ultraviolet light. Continuing to play the same games by the same rules will produce the same results: results we cannot afford.

So our rising expectations for a better life through the benefits of technology can only be met with the continued growth of the economy, which in turn is precluded by the heightened toxicity of our planet. Talk about a Hobson's Choice and Catch 22!

Enter a final force: **Instant Global Communication**. Not only are we in a bind with many strange things happening, but all of

us everywhere know about it instantaneously. Back in the good old days of slow communications, ignorance very often was bliss. What we did not know we did not have to respond to. At the very least, the delay in communication provided breathing space. Breathing space is now gone, replaced by a hyperactive, superheated, interconnected world. Action and reaction cycle on each other with such rapidity that it is often difficult to tell one from the other. In truth we have become a small electronic village, and the probability that we will ever be anything like we used to be is minute. The times are not only changing. They have changed – creating a whole new ethos in which we as individuals, and in our organizational mode, must operate. The only certainty is that whatever we were, is no more. And whatever we are about to become, has not quite happened yet. We stand in Open Space.

### **Organizations in Open Space**

For organizations designed to perform in a different age, the Open Space environment is anything but comfortable. In part this is a question of function and fit. Systems that performed quite adequately in a slower, less complex world now find the speed and multiplicity of events confusing and often overwhelming. Venerable corporations with layered bureaucratic structures always had a definite way of doing things, and

everything was in order. Now, by the time a decision is made the conditions that necessitated the decision have radically changed to the point that the proposed action is irrelevant or wrong. By doing well what they have always done, organizations get what they always got, but that no longer works.

The malaise of the moment, however, has a root cause much deeper than the misalignment of function and form. The critical issue is control. We do not have it. Indeed we never did, at least not in the form we imagined.

## **The End of Control**

One might write the history of Western management in terms of an unending search for control. Chapters would be devoted to lengthy discussions of the "span of control," – how many people, really, can the manager manage? Hell, of course, is being *out of control*, for we all know that losing control is the absolute epitome of degradation. Any manager in that sorry condition is no longer worthy of the name. Managerial Heaven, on the other hand, is *making the plan, managing the plan, and meeting the plan*. In Heaven the numbers are magic, the span of control perfect, and somebody is in charge.

There is a small difficulty with this view of the world. Making a plan is relatively simple. But making a plan that will conform to reality for a time longer than it takes the ink to dry is difficult. And of course if the plan is out of date, managing it is an exercise in frustration, while meeting such a plan is an act of futility. No wonder managers are experiencing stress at record levels. It seems that somebody changed the rules without informing the players.

How did we get into this sorry mess? Leaving the fine points to future historians, suffice it to say that somewhere along the line we became afflicted with the notion of a *Closed System*, which is to be distinguished from an *Open System*. Back in the halcyon days of Taylorism, Henry Ford, and the Model T, when Scientific Management was birthing, confidence abounded that Industrial Man (as in He-Man) could replicate the clockwork universe of Newtonian physics. Each cog, shaft, and pulley fitted with precision, and the necessary manpower was added and controlled with finesse. Time and motion studies enabled the effort, and the notion of a Closed System made the whole enterprise intellectually respectable.

In a Closed System the organizational boundaries are perceived as impermeable. Nothing comes in or goes out except at the pleasure of management, and what happens inside always occurs

under the direction of those in charge. Those were the days when bosses were really bosses.

But notice that the whole thing falls apart if the system is not actually closed. After all, if things happen in the organization without management control, indeed without any hope of management control, requiring total control as the mark of good management is simple madness.

As it turns out, Closed Systems are a fabrication of the scientific imagination, useful only in a laboratory as a way of limiting disturbances to experiments, otherwise known as controlling the variables. In order to gain knowledge of system function, barriers are built between the system and the outside world. Walls of lead and concrete separate the experimental environment from the world of nature. In such a rarified atmosphere one might begin to know with scientific certainty, and the fact that this atmosphere bears little if any resemblance to the natural order of things can be conveniently forgotten for the period of the experiment. In actual fact, however, the systems under observation never can be effectively shielded from the external environment. A Closed System was, is, and always shall be a scientific fiction, useful in certain experimental situations, but never to be confused with life in the world. To do so is to invite bad science and worse.

And this, of course, is exactly what we have done in the strange world of Management Science. By elevating the notion of the Closed System to the exalted status of cardinal principle, we insure that the house of Management Science is a house of cards. Superficially, the notion of *control* is enshrined. The control we are looking for, however, has the substance of the Emperor's clothes.<sup>1</sup> We now discover the Emperor to be naked.

Given the events of the moment and recent past, it may be worthwhile pondering the question: Why has it taken us so long to recognize the Emperor's nakedness? In truth we have known for some time that the old fellow did not have a stitch on. For proof of our collective awareness, I point to the general recognition of how "things really get done." We all *said* the boss was the boss and in control, ruling the kingdom according to the structure and procedure outlined in the omnipresent Organization Chart. We all *knew* something quite different.

In every organization that I have known for the past 30 years, either as a member, executive, consultant, or observer, it has always been the case that while everybody pointed to the organization structure as the central regulator of identity and function, it was known by one and all that little, if anything, got done as it was supposed to. The reality of this condition is

---

<sup>1</sup> The Emperor's Cloths is a delightful folktale in which the citizens of the empire maintain a conspiracy of silence regarding the fact that their ruler is naked. One day a small child says the unsayable and interesting things ensue.



made manifest by a scenario commonly encountered when first entering an organization. In answer to the question (explicit or implied), "What is going on around this place," a copy of the organization chart is produced. No sooner has the chart hit the table than its accuracy is questioned. Indeed the chart is often introduced with the words, "Do not worry about this too much because we are in the process of reorganization."

With the true state of circumstances now on the table, a follow-up question is in order. "If the organization chart does not help me to understand how things get done around here, would you please tell me what does?"

Here we come to truth time. It turns out that you would do well to look up a crusty old curmudgeon hiding out in a distant part of the organization – off the chart, so to speak. By listening carefully, or even not so carefully, it becomes quite clear that were we to do what we said we did, we would undoubtedly get little if anything done. Ever. Because everybody knows – "if you want to get something done go see ..."

None of this was taught in management school. Naturally. When the message finally gets through, it is called experience. It comes as some sort of blinding flash of the obvious.

What on earth is going on here? There are probably nicer ways to put this, but I think the truth is that we are engaged in a collective conspiracy. Rather like the villagers in the fable,

whose emperor remained clothed only by virtue of a common delusion, we cannot afford to admit that the organizational structure is an arbitrary creation, that the system is really open, and nobody is in control. After all, if nobody is in charge, maybe we all are.

There is good news in the bad. Once we have eliminated our common delusion and yielded to the blinding flash of the obvious, it turns out that Open Space can be a very productive arena in which a new organizational life form, fully adapted to the present environmental conditions, is available. It is the Millennium Organization.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Or in words that I have used before, the InterActive Learning Organization. See *Riding the Tiger* (ABBOTT PUBLISHING, 1992).

The Millennium Organization

It does not take a genius to specify the organizational qualities and characteristics necessary for survival, growth, and profit. Productive organizations will be flexible, adaptable, capable of constant transformation, all while maintaining a clear sense of purpose, meaning, and identity. Flexibility at the expense of identity and purpose will yield little more than mush. Purpose and identity, with marginal to no capacity for ongoing transformation, will provide us with exactly what we have at the moment: dinosaurs.

Faced with the facts, if these are the facts, one might argue for a balanced approach: equal parts of flexibility and purpose, for example. The job of management, of course, is to control the mix so that things do not get out of hand. Obviously we must have change, adaptation, and transformation, but it must be managed. We simply cannot let it get out of control.

For reasons of acuity of vision or simple despair, a growing number have concluded that the notion of managing change in order to achieve a balance between identity and transformation is a

wonderful idea with a fatal flaw: it does not work, because we simply do not have the wisdom or the horsepower. There remains, therefore, a significant question. What is the alternative?

The leading edge of a workable alternative appears the moment we break our ancient Western habit of playing *Either/Or*, and move on to a new game, well known in the East, called *Both/And*. In the world of manageable, Closed Systems, clear-cut choices are the rule. It is either black or white, light or dark, right or wrong, left or right, conservative or liberal, centralized or decentralized... and so on *ad nauseam*. In the real world, such clarity of choice is rarely if ever apparent. The more usual situation is muddied and muddled. In short, *Both/And*.

Applied to our search for an organization for the next millennium, the notion of *Both/And* suggests that identity and purpose do not stand in opposition to change, adaptability, and transformation. Indeed, if we are going to survive in this world, we will have to have all of the above, all at once, interchangeably, and on an ongoing basis. Obviously, that could lead to no small amount of confusion unless it were possible to *perceive our*

*organizational identity and purpose precisely in the style or manner of change, adaptation, and transformation.*

Given such a viewpoint, the fundamental meaning of our organizations will no longer be grasped in terms of what they were or are, but rather in their *act of becoming*. Institutions, businesses, and countries are not static phenomena whose identity is lost in the process of transformation. On the contrary, it is the quality and style of their transformation that create the essential identity.

### **Evolution of the Millennium Organization**

One of the more interesting aspects of the story of evolution is the way in which conditions toxic to one species become fundamental preconditions for an emergent species. Way back in the beginning, when there were only plants, carbon dioxide was the breath of life, and oxygen a waste product. Fortunately the earth at that time was bathed in a virtual sea of carbon dioxide, so why worry about a little oxygen pollution? Eventually the balance shifted, and what started out as paradise if you happened to be green and stuffed with chlorophyll, became

highly toxic and close to lethal. What to do? Create an animal, something that loved oxygen and excreted carbon dioxide.

It has been a workable tradeoff ever since, although at the present moment, things do seem to be getting a little out of hand, what with the greenhouse effect and holes in the ozone layer. Be that as it may, there is a lesson here even if our rendition of evolutionary theory is not the most elegant. The lesson is this: when the environment becomes toxic for one life form it is reasonable to anticipate the emergence of a new one which will make virtue out of necessity and opportunity out of a mess.

So we might ask ourselves what sort of organizational life form might possibly be emerging to take advantage of a highly toxic environment for the old way of doing business? If the loss of control and presence of high levels of chaos are problematic for the old style business, we would then expect some chaos-eating wonder creature to make positive use of what is obviously an abundant potential resource.

It is a testimony to the powerful and deep resources of human consciousness, by whatever name, that such a new organization is in fact emerging out of the ooze. It would be nice if somebody could take credit for its design and propagation, but I think the Millennium Organization has emerged as a natural, one might almost say inevitable, response to the

conditions of our existence. The appearance has not been without pain and difficulty, and there are more than a few who doubt its presence or hope it will go away. But it is really here and growing.

## **What Is IT?**

The fundamental character of the Millennium Organization is revealed in its celebration of life as an Open System. It is constantly engaged in dialogue with the world around, and indeed the difference between the world and the organization is, more often than not, a matter of perception. *Inside* and *outside* become relative, and sometimes meaningless terms, boundaries a matter of focus and convenience rather than hard determination.

Business is done through a process of co-creation in which ongoing collaborative relationships are the norm, and winning and losing, as zero sum games, are relegated to an earlier, more barbaric period. Competition is by no means banished, but it is competition for the larger purpose of realizing potential and actualizing latent gifts, and not to vanquish or destroy the opponent.

There is much in the character of the Millennium Organization which appears wrong, counter-intuitive, naive, Pollyannaish, and at some level, quite threatening. The

conventional wisdom is firm that business is war, cooperation is for wimps, and winning is everything. Boundaries must therefore be firmly established and defended, communication restricted to a strict need-to-know basis, particularly when dealing with proprietary information, and the world held off at a more than polite distance. Any suggestion to the contrary is, to put it bluntly, subversive.

Proving to those imprisoned by the conventional wisdom that there is an alternative now making itself manifest in the Millennium Organization is a difficult, perhaps impossible job. Proof requires a common perceptual or logical base, and that does not exist. All parties to this discussion are looking at the very same world, but through very different eyes. Like the optimist and the pessimist regarding a glass with 50 percent of its volume taken up by water, there is absolute agreement about the percentage. But is it 50 percent full? Or 50 percent empty?

Leaving the question of proof to one side for the moment, I find myself not only drawn to, but captivated by the Millennium Organization for three reasons. First of all, it feels better. Frankly, I do not have the time or energy to defend the boundaries and constantly check my fellow human beings for malice and subversion. Call it naive or foolhardy, but I find it



infinitely more comfortable and profitable to presume fellowship and adjust for knavery, than the reverse.

Second, it works better. Operating towards others as if the boundaries were minimal creates conditions for interchange and productivity that are hard to beat. Every now and again, somebody raises the issue of protecting proprietary interests, and I suppose there is something to be said for the defense of borders when self-interest is at stake. However, I am not at all sure that enlightened self-interest does not require open borders. With things moving as fast as they are, what was "cutting edge" one moment is "old hat" the next. The central issue is not how long you can keep the old idea (approach, product, and such) secret, but rather how quickly you can generate something new. And the generation of innovation requires stimulation, openness, interchange – all the things that occur when borders are left unguarded.

The final reason I find myself drawn to the Millennium Organization is that I am not sure there is really any choice. It is my experience that the Millennium Organization is happening, or maybe better yet, has happened. The borders and boundaries, like it or not, are coming down. The possibility of control, as previously practiced, is quite limited at best. In such an environment, the strange thing we call organization has no choice but to evolve – or die. Some of our organizations (businesses,

national entities, institutions) have died, and more are clearly on the way. Those that remain, along with those presently emerging, look a lot more like the Millennium Organization than their parents or grandparents in the organizational lineage. Something is quite different and getting more so. I can only celebrate this difference.

### **Characteristics of the Millennium Organization**

The defining characteristics of the Millennium Organization are more a matter of style than substance. The way things are done is infinitely more critical than the size or structure of the operations. Such organizations may be no more than two or three people gathered together to accomplish some purpose, or a cast of thousands with a similar intent. Curiously enough, Millennium Organizations apparently work the same way no matter how many people are involved. While there may be a lower limit of two, I am not sure there is any upward limit, a positive advantage given that there are in excess of five and a half billion of us here on the planet, with more arriving daily. Somewhere along the line we are going to have to get organized.

As for structure, the guidelines seem to be anything that works. Over time, and often at the same time, a whole multitude

of organizational structures put in an appearance. The geometry is as varied as the tasks that confront us, and the question is never what is the *one right* structure in some abstract sense, but rather what structural array will get the job done. Everything from circles to steeply ranked hierarchies has a place. There are even times when important things get done in the absence of any visible structure at all.

The noncritical nature of size and structure will disturb those (most of us) who have made a life work searching for the perfect structure and optimal size. However, compared to several other factors, size and structure in the Millennium Organization make a marginal difference in terms of impact, effectiveness, and overall performance. The critical qualities are five: 1) High Learning, 2) High Play, 3) Appropriate Structure and Control, 4) Genuine Community, and 5) Primacy of Spirit.

### **High Learning**

Thomas Kuhn, in an extraordinarily influential, brief book entitled *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*,<sup>3</sup> makes the distinction between what he calls *High Science* and *Normal Science*. High Science is what gets done at those moments of paradigm shift (it was Kuhn who created the whole notion of

---

<sup>3</sup> Kuhn, Thomas, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (University of Chicago Press, 1962).

paradigm), when an old world view passes from the stage and a new one takes its place. Rather than progressing by logical steps incrementally arrived at, High Science functions all in a rush with grand intuitive leaps. Very messy, very exciting, and absolutely at the core meaning of Breakthrough.

Normal Science is what you do upon arrival, neatening up the mess, so to speak. It is essential, but not very exciting.

Borrowing a leaf from Kuhn's book with some modification, I offer High Learning as the first characteristic of the Millennium Organization. Perhaps we could have continued with the words High Science, and at the level of literal meaning, that would certainly work. But it clouds a fundamental point I wish to underscore. In the Millennium Organization, learning is not a *sometime* thing reserved for those moments when there is nothing better to do, nor a *someone* thing reserved for those special people called Scientists. Learning is an everyday, everybody, all together kind of phenomenon. It occurs not because it is nice, proper, or correct, but because there is no other way to go.

It is learning of a special sort, fully responsive to the chaotic conditions of the environment and the essential nature of the Millennium Organization as an Open System. When the borders are open and the environment chaotic, organizational dissolution is a constant possibility. Unless. Unless there is a mechanism that will convert chaos into something useful. As you might

suspect, the mechanism is High Learning, and the convert of chaos is creativity and innovation.

Chaos, while painful, has the positive attribute of opening up any situation in new and different ways. When the old order goes, and the new one has yet to arrive, the interim state may be a mess, but it is also a momentary revelation of what lies at the depths. Under everyday circumstances, the essence is hidden by a smooth veneer of normalcy. But when chaos strikes, the veneer is ripped to shreds, and we have the opportunity to see things as they really are.

Metaphorically, it is as if a powerful hurricane passed through and all the foundations were revealed through the work of the wind and the tide. Gale-driven walls of water have cut to the quick, and there in the bright light of day, we see the buried power lines, water pipes, and sewer mains. Not a pretty picture, but instructive nonetheless.

The advent of chaos in our organizations has a similar effect. When everyday normalcy is truly gone, we are left with the fundamentals. There is no escaping the elemental questions: Who are we? What are we doing here? Where are we going?

In other more pleasant circumstances, such questions are answered automatically, if they are even asked. "Of course we know who we are! Haven't we been in business for many years? We

are doing what we have always done, and why should we do anything different?"

Chaos creates the opening to difference, it forces the question, provides the opportunity for learning. Not everyday, normal learning, but High Learning, vaulting from what was to what might be. If the gift of chaos is received, and converted by High Learning from painful incident into a pre-vision of the future, the possibility for fulfillment of organizational potential is well on the way to becoming real. In a moment the greatest threat to the organizational future, chaos, becomes the necessary precondition for that future, made so by High Learning. No chaos, no difference, no learning, no future. The Millennium Organization simply cannot survive without chaos, for it is chaos that constantly sends the organization on its way to the future.

But how can the organization continue? By what means will we be able to recognize the organization as such? Where is its identity if that identity is constantly in jeopardy, stripped away as chaos ravishes the current forms of organizational life?

The answer is that the identity of an organization does not exist in the formal manifestations, but rather in the act of manifesting. A journey is not ultimately defined by the end point or way stations, but rather the quality of the journeying itself. Providing that special, recognizable quality is the gift of the next characteristic of the Millennium Organization: High Play.

## High Play

Everybody knows that work and play are rather like oil and water, they do not mix. How, therefore, can High Play be an essential, defining characteristic of the Millennium Organization? Either such an organization is serious or a joke, and if serious it can hardly be playful – or so it seems.

Taking business seriously is our first mistake; or at least it is in an age marked by chaos, populated by Open Systems, and where control, as we used to know it, no longer exists. Were we to take all that is going on with absolute seriousness, it is quite likely that we would lose what sanity we have left. If nothing else, High Play is an antidote to the toxic, high-stakes environment which is our earth. But there is more involved here than simply using humor to get us through the day. Play is one of the most powerful tools in our possession, and certainly not to be equated with the trivial.

High intellectual adventure is pursued in a playful fashion. Only through play can we bring the full power of all our resources to bear on the issue at hand *without forming a fixed attachment to some particular outcome.*

Living effectively in this marvelous, changing world is impossible with anything less than everything we have physically,

emotionally, and intellectually. But with that kind of investment it is quite understandable that we should become attached to, and defensive about, the way we see things. Then the world changes again, and all of a sudden, what seemed so certain is hardly even on the radar screen. If our attachment to what was is unbreakable, we too will disappear from the screen of life. *High Play allows us to take everything absolutely seriously, and then let it all go with a smile.* The alternative is hardening of the intellectual and emotional arteries, ossified fundamentalism, doctrinaire obscurantism, and a variety of other hideous conditions not conducive to a full, meaningful life in the new millennium.

High Play works as follows. In the process of learning and exploring new realities, one is engaged in a constant alternation between experience and concept. We engage the realities that challenge us<sup>4</sup> and then tell a likely story about their shape, form, and function, otherwise known as building a theory or creating a concept. The purpose of this story, or theory, is to help us make sense of the new reality and fit it into the complex environment composed of all the other realities we live with.

A theory or story is the intellectual map upon which we place the reality we are considering as a way of comprehending its position in time, space, and the purpose of things. But it is

---

<sup>4</sup> "The differences that make a difference." Thank you Gregory Bateson.



always an arbitrary, approximate rendition of what is, never to be confused with the truth. To ask if a theory is true is to totally misunderstand the nature of theory. The proper question is, does it work? Do the eyeglasses of this particular theoretical formulation enable us to see reality in a more useful and effective fashion? If so, we have a good theory. If not, we need to construct another. But under no circumstances should we confuse theory with reality, even as the map is not to be confused with the territory.

In a slower day, reality appeared unchanging, and a given theoretical construct of that reality might hang about for some time. At the moment realities, virtual and otherwise, along with the maps thereof, change with mind-numbing speed, not only in rapid linear sequence, but also in simultaneity, as reality laps reality to create a multiplicity of realities.

Truly there is more than enough to give you a severe headache, but what does all this have to do with High Play? A short time in any first-class nursery school will provide the answer. Watch carefully as the Building Block Empires are constructed. Note the considered determination with which each new piece is fitted into place. Listen as the small citizens engage each other seriously in the world of their making. And then, when it is juice and cracker time, appreciate the joyful screams as the towering structure is reduced to rubble. Joy is to

be found not in what is or was but in the journey itself, in the process of creation and not in the creature. When a new reality appears (juice and crackers) it is time to let the empire go with gusto. That is High Play.

High Play has been with us forever as one of the better kept secrets hidden in the private preserves of philosophers, scientists, and priests, or at least the good ones who did not take themselves too seriously. It is also available to children everywhere. High Play is available to us all if we will but remember.

### **Appropriate Structure and Control**

The Millennium Organization is not without structure. Indeed, it may have many structures sequentially, or even all at the same time. The issue is not structure or no structure, but rather *appropriate structure*: appropriate to the task, the environment, and the people involved.

Neither is the Millennium Organization without control, but control, like structure, is always appropriate to the task, the environment, and the people involved. Never (or at least not for long) is control manifest in an arbitrary fashion as a modern-day version of the divine right of kings.

Structure and control are inextricably related, for control is structure at work. We perceive the presence of structure when we witness the act of control, and both structure and control are simply two elements of the same entity – effective management.

Structure, control, management all have appropriate places in the Millennium Organization, but the word *appropriate* is critical. Structure emerges as a natural expression of the task, people, and environment. Control is what you do in and through that structure. Management puts it all together, not as the special prerogative of an elite group of people, but a function to be performed appropriately – potentially by anybody. In the Millennium Organization management is no longer capitalized, as in *The Management*.

In the old order, there was one structure, a right structure, a perfect structure. Many of us spent, and I would say wasted, considerable time seeking this Holy Grail of organizational life. The presumption was that if we could just find the optimal structure and get ourselves re-organized for the last time, surely the Kingdom of God, Nirvana, or some such would arrive.

All of that proved to be wishful thinking. We never found it, and with the wisdom of hindsight, it should have been clear that we never could. Ah, but if we only knew then what we know now! Structures only work in given circumstances. Change the

circumstances and you must change the structure, or go out of business. In a world of constantly changing circumstances, the notion of the one perfect structure is a little silly.

The important circumstances may be defined in a number of ways, but a simple one was outlined above: the people, the task, and the environment. Every group of people, indeed even the same group of people on different days, will perform a task differently, and so they should. Performing a task requires certain abilities and skills, and no matter how much we seek to standardize work forces, the central fact remains: people are different. We can, of course, pretend that difference does not exist, or seek to eliminate it by shoving everybody into the same box, but neither of these approaches is terribly effective, and both tend to produce either suboptimization or revolution.

Getting the best from folks requires that they be comfortable in what they are doing. It is not unlike wearing shoes. If the shoes pinch, or are too loose, and you have to be on your feet all day to do a job, no amount of brilliance, motivation, or inspiration will make much difference. The job simply is not going to get done as well as it might.

Structure in the organization is like shoes on the feet, with different shoes for different occasions. Not all are comfortable or appropriate in every instance. Field boots just do not make it at a black-tie dinner. We have to make some choices,

and we should do no less in terms of the structure of our organizations. The question is always appropriateness.

An organization, unfortunately, is more complicated than feet and shoes, if only because it must often deal with multiple circumstances simultaneously. It is not quite a matter of being all things to all people, but sometimes it comes rather close. The way an employee sees an organization is obviously different from the perception of a competitor, vendor, customer, bank, or the federal government. Each of these viewpoints creates a different circumstance, or reality, requiring a different approach – which also means a different structure. In the ordinary course of business it is possible that all of these viewpoints must be taken into consideration at the same time. It would be nicer if only one group would appear at any one time, but life is rarely that kind. So here we are in a muddle. Efficiency, effectiveness, and profitability (if we are out to make a profit) all require that we optimize our operations. To do this well it is necessary to operate from multiple structures simultaneously. Talk about confusion!

As with structure, so with control. No longer is the locus of control conferred by title, but rather by task and function. If you ask who is in charge, the answer is whoever has the ball. And should there be a number of balls in the air at once, there will be a similar number of people in charge.

So it looks like complexity twice confounded one more time, with an abundant possibility for confusion. On the one hand, optimal performance requires multiple simultaneous structures, combined with numerous centers of control. At the same time, the limitation of human intelligence says, "Oh no, that is unthinkable!" Actually, it can and does all work, and the secret is High Play.

High Play enables us to take any given structure or center of control with a grain of salt, a dash of humor, a sense of adventure. In the spirit of High Play, we can have as much fun tearing a structure down as building it up, and the absence of structure is perceived as a marvelous opportunity to engage in creative enterprise. The same may be said for control. It is true that playfulness, as it relates to control, often appears as rebellion, but rebellion at some level is the essence of innovation. We come to understand that no center of control is absolute, even as no structure is eternal and perfect. Both structure and control serve a higher power: playfulness.

From the outside, High Play occasionally appears destructive or even irreverent. Truthfully, it is open season on sacred cows of all sorts, but this does not imply a respect for nothing. Respect, however, is reserved for the joyful process of creation, even as the creatures are happily abandoned, for it is the quality of the journey, and not the way stations and end points that are celebrated.

### **Genuine Community**

The fourth characteristic of the Millennium Organization is Genuine Community. It is not the forced, facile, false community experienced at the typical office party. Endurance at such affairs is possible only through the heavy application of anesthesia, and pasted smiles fall off faces as they pass out – through the door or into alternative consciousness. Then there were those wonderful corporate gatherings when the Boss informed the group that, "We are all one big happy family!" At the time his statement could only be considered a bald-faced lie, or an executive directive aimed at the future, for it certainly had little to do with present reality.

To be fair, we really worked on building community. There were seminars, training programs, books, videos – but it seemed that the harder we tried, the further we got from our intended

objective. Truthfully, we really only learned how badly off we were.

And that was our second mistake.<sup>5</sup> We tried. Community does not happen by trying. We are already in community and it is only by continuing effort that we destroy this reality, building walls, guarding boundaries, and creating turf. There was, and probably still is, a rationale for boundary-making, for this is the way we create our individuality and build our egos. But once created, there would seem to be little sense in continuing what is obviously a very painful and destructive pattern of existence.

The situation resembles that of a teenager who manifests all sorts of rebellious behavior as a way of defining who he or she is, relative to those Neanderthal creatures known as parents. Fortunately this painful situation does not go on forever in most cases, and sooner or later there is movement towards rejoining the human race. This latter statement is a patronizing remark made by (guess what) a parent, and the human race is often enriched and grown by the rebellion. But enough is enough! No matter how large and long the rebellion may last, the kid, like it or not, is still part of the family. That is the prior condition, an unchanging and unchangeable fact. It is only necessary to acknowledge the reality.

---

<sup>5</sup> The first mistake was taking business seriously.



In like manner, we, despite many of our best efforts to the contrary, are still part of the human race. Humankind is one. There may have been separate species previously, and perhaps in the future new ones will emerge. But right at the moment every creature on earth that talks like a hominoid, walks like a hominoid, looks like a hominoid is...Homo sapiens. And such differences as there are disappear before the similarities. The astronauts helped us to remember that there are no political boundaries visible on earth. And I am sure a visiting Martian would remark, as some of us have been known to when viewing people from a different land – "You really cannot tell 'em apart. If you have seen one human, you have seen them all."

So here is an interesting question. Why do we continue to struggle for what we already have? *We do not have to make community, we simply have to be it.* And being genuinely in community is one of the outstanding characteristics of the Millennium Organization.

Now you may be asking yourself how this magic might occur. Is it not true that the world is currently divided by controversy and splintered by difference? Of course. But is it not also true that most of the controversy and division is created by folks bound to guard the borders and stay in control? In short, they are maintaining the interesting, but dangerous

notion that the borders are real and somebody is in charge. The emperor's clothes all over again.

It is more than possible, indeed likely, that the world as a whole is not ready for participation in the Millennium Organization. Clearly there are places where love, light, and unity have yet to break out. I would argue, however, that there is a trend. The walls are coming down, and we are being forced to learn that our planet is an Open System and no one of us, or any small group, is in charge.

There is a certain resistance to this learning and a desperate hope that perhaps we can get back to the old ways of doing things. During the Cold War, there was a comforting level of antagonism with the world neatly divided between East and West, the enslaved and the free. But I think the evidence grows that a new order is arriving, having nothing to do with changed boundaries and bosses, but rather the elimination of both.

Granted, a certain period of latency occurs as the process moves along globally. Rome was not built in a day, nor is there any guarantee that everything is going to be all right in the final reel. There is, however, one certainty. There is no going back, for the river having passed this way once will never do so again. In the interim, while we are waiting for all the world to catch up, we could do worse than enjoy our growing awareness of the Millennium Organization and apply this insight to our own

every day businesses and institutions. When it comes to genuine community, we need only acknowledge its presence and allow it to be. Our problem to this point is that we have been working too hard.

Actually, in the presence of High Learning, High Play, and Appropriate Structure and Control, you simply cannot avoid Genuine Community. It happens, like it or not. The reason is appallingly simple: there is nothing to get in the way. *When structure, and control, stand in the service of learning and play, community is the inevitable result.* Without arbitrary boundaries and barriers, the natural unity of humankind is made manifest.

### **Primacy of Spirit**

The final defining characteristic of the Millennium Organization is the Primacy of Spirit. Spirit is rather hard to define, but we all know it when we meet. I recognize in these days of crass materialism that a statement about the Primacy of Spirit is risky, outrageous, and definitely unprovable. On the other hand, I do not know anybody who would be interested in proving it, or anything that would be gained if you managed to do so. Ask any coach, sales manager, production team member,

secretary – the really important people – about the place of Spirit, and I will be terribly surprised if it does not come out Number One on the list. When the Spirit is up, fantastic things happen. When it is not, you might as well forget it.

Spirit cannot be bought, ordered, directed. It responds positively to a very different treatment called *inspiration*. Furthermore, Spirit will not stay in special little compartments of time and space, allowed out only at coffee breaks or on the athletic field. When Spirit is pushed into a box, it dies.

The overt presence of Spirit in an organization can be unsettling, especially for those who think they are in charge of maintaining the boundaries and controlling the business. It is not so much that Spirit violates the rules. It simply overlooks them, and plays by its own rules. In the old days, when learning was normal (dull, boring), play was banned, and one structure supreme, Spirit was not only unsettling, it was downright embarrassing. When present it led to such anomalous behavior as *having fun at work*. We all knew that work was hard, unpleasant, and to be avoided at all costs. Fun at work just did not make any sense. After all, what would you do in retirement if you were already having fun on the job?

Strange things happen in the Millennium Organization. Under the conditions of High Learning, High Play, Appropriate Structure, and Genuine Community, Spirit has a field day. Having

fun at work is expected, and the absence of fun is a clear indication that something is wrong. Hedonism, as the constant pursuit of pleasure, is no longer to be equated with rank debauchery, but even has an ethical content. Should you require higher authority for such an outrageous notion, remember the counsel of Saint Augustine, "Love God and do as you please."

One might call the Millennium Organization "spiritual," though I think "spirited" is a closer fit. The word spiritual, unfortunately, has had a very hard life. For too many people it is roughly equivalent to bizarre, otherworldly, or just plain "woo-woo." Spirited, on the other hand implies a certain power, zest, elan, or joie de vivre. It is at once earthy and transcendent, describing the sort of place where feet stay on the ground and heads touch the clouds.

The primacy and presence of a positive, powerful Spirit is at once pleasant, awesome, and productive. It is pleasant to see people enjoying themselves, awesome to watch their energy, and satisfying to see the results. Compared to other ways of being in organization, it seems almost unbelievable and suggests that there must be some sophisticated, complicated, esoteric new technique at work here. The truth is embarrassingly simple. Things work as well as they do because little if anything gets in the way. Inappropriate, multitiered structures, hung over from another day are banished. Ego-driven control freaks have found it

useful to seek alternative employment. In short, barriers to doing a job quickly, with excellence and pride, are eliminated. It is an amazing fact: left to themselves good people do good work, and enjoy it. And the Spirit is fantastic.

## Chapter IV

### We Are Already There (Almost)

It may have struck you as odd, in reading the previous chapter, that I should describe the Millennium Organization as if it were already present. You were not mistaken, and I could be wrong, but I do not think that we are dealing with some yet-to-be realized state, an abstract, ideal concept that must be implemented. The Millennium Organization is here now, and that is both the problem and the opportunity.

The presence of the Millennium Organization, and more specifically the conditions that gave rise to it, is an enormous problem for all those who choose to ignore it. People who persist in the belief that the world can be divided into hermetically sealed units, each with its own unique structure, control mechanisms, and somebody in charge, are, to put it bluntly, deceiving themselves. It is highly doubtful that such a world ever existed, except in our imagination, and certainly it does

not exist at the moment. The context of organizational life has changed, radically so. With the change in context must come a change in function, driven not by some moral imperative or theoretical "ought," but by a natural, unavoidable internal logic. Change the context and the content will alter.

The major difficulty with contextual shifts is that every day reality apparently remains unaffected. Main Street still crosses Elm, the sun rises in the east, and taxes (in the United States at least) are due on the 15th of April. On a superficial level everything appears the same. On a fundamental level all is different. To appreciate the point, we have only to recall the major contextual shifts of our recent past. Peace breaks out, for example.

For most of my life the fundamental structure of the universe, or at least my universe, was determined by undying hostility between the East and the West. Virtually all aspects of life were shaped by this enmity, providing a rationale for some of the strangest activities. We in the United States entered space, not because it was a good idea or necessary to our collective growth, but to beat the Russians. Science curricula were enhanced, not to enrich the lives of our children, but once again to beat the Russians. Industry, economics, politics, international development, all were shaped to a major degree in



defense of the West against the Evil Empire. And then guess what? The Empire dissolved. The context changed. We have changed.

The end of the Evil Empire is contributory to the altered conditions in our world, but by no means determinative. As massive as this political shift may have been, it is but one force among many, and perhaps only a minor one, being more effect than cause. If ever there was a Closed System with somebody supposedly in charge it was the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The global forces affecting all of us affected it, but the USSR apparently did not have the internal reserves and institutional elasticity to adapt, and consequently fell apart.

The cosmic jury is still out for us in the West, but one thing is certain, we can no longer do business as we once did. The fate of the USSR is a warning, which may or may not be sufficient to attract our attention, and hiding behind the notion that such a fate could never be ours is tempting. After all, they were evil and we are good, or so it said in all the promotional literature.

Yet I think it is fair to say that in some very important ways our similarities were infinitely greater than our differences. We shared a common belief in the defensibility of borders and the possibility, as well as the necessity, of control. Both of us labored under the mistaken notion that Closed Systems were real and maintainable. The Old Soviets have now

learned differently. We are in the process of discovering our own capacity for learning.

With the change in global context comes a consequent change in the content and function of our institutions. Those among us who are still seeking employment as "Change Agents," are, I fear, a little late. It is no longer a question of effecting the change, but rather learning to live with it in useful ways. At this point the emergence of the Millennium Organization becomes a positive blessing, albeit quite unsettling. Contrasted with the old way of doing business it appears strange, unpredictable, counterintuitive, and just plain wrong. I predict, however, that in a short period it will become accepted as if it had always been.

So what evidence may possibly be adduced in support of these outrageous statements? Unfortunately, most of the evidence is visible only to those who have the eyes to see. Others, who remain convinced for whatever reason that such a phenomenon as the Millennium Organization can only be the product of wishful thinking or smoking controlled substances, will look at the world as it is and see nothing new, except for the ongoing decline of life. Different eyes will look at the same world and take hope from the evident fact that although nothing seems to be working as it used to, and much is not working at all, we nevertheless muddle through. It is entirely possible that the current state of

affairs is just outrageous luck. Or, as I would propose, something very powerful is happening in our midst.

Consider the following. On the 19th of October in 1987, the financial world fell apart. In three or four hours during the afternoon, the United States market alone lost half a trillion dollars – just about one half of the total US federal budget at the time. I sometimes think that the exciting events of the 19th constitute the largest mystical experience the American people have ever participated in. After all, that money just went "poof." Nobody stole it, the armored trucks did not carry it away. It just disappeared in a classical case of, "Now you see it, now you don't."

But the real magic was revealed not in what happened, but in what did not. In fact, virtually nothing happened. Every prediction of massive catastrophe and global disaster simply did not occur. We poofed half a trillion, and six months later, except for several government commissions, there was little indication that anything had ever happened. Of course, some people playing on the farther reaches of riskiness in the financial markets found that their wings had been clipped, but for the vast majority, October the 19th was a nonevent.

It is reasonable to ask why. Seen with old eyes, the answer comes in terms of the farsighted wisdom of statesmen and economists who created the mechanisms to avoid such a disaster

and then exercised the heroic steps necessary to keep things going. A more honest answer might be that nobody had the foggiest idea what was going on, and yet somehow we made it. And so we come back to the question, why? Was it luck, or was it something else?

I would like to split the difference and suggest that, luckily it was something else. And that something else was the leading edge of Millennium Organization. While we were not looking, and in spite of our best efforts to preserve the status quo, the wellsprings of the human spirit<sup>6</sup> had responded to the changing environmental circumstances. A new way of being in organization emerged, which was both comfortable and effective in the new circumstances marked by permeable boundaries, the metamorphosis of control, and the world of Open Systems.

If there is a shred of truth to what I am proposing, the natural next step would be for us to start doing intentionally what we seem to be doing anyway. Just suppose that the Millennium Organization actually had put in an appearance. How do we cooperate with the winds of fate and optimize our performance in the new reality? I think there is more than a little evidence that such a process of cooperation and optimization is under way. Not everywhere, and not all at once, but happening.

---

<sup>6</sup> Please feel free to attribute all these goings on to whatever source you feel comfortable: Great Spirit of the Universe, Cosmic Consciousness, or God him or herself.

Close to the epicenter of this nonevent, the crash of '87, were the various brokerage houses in the several corners of the globe. For years these folks had been exercising their profession in a time-honored fashion. Every morning they would show up at the stock exchange, whether that be located in New York, London or Tokyo. They started trading when the bell rang and stopped when it rang again. After hours there was lots of paperwork activity in the back rooms. Officially, however, the market was closed, the doors were locked, and nothing was going to happen until the next day when once more the doors would open and the bell ring. Such was life in a Closed System *par excellence*. Of course, that was not the way it was at all.

While most people were looking the other way, a funny thing happened in the back rooms. It arrived in metal boxes and was called the computer. At first it was just a super adding machine to help the back room boys do their job tracking what had transpired the previous day. But it did not take long before the worst fears of technophobes were realized. The new creature had taken on a life of its own and created a unique environment, which we might call the cybersphere.

In the cybersphere, ancient constraints of time and space no longer operated. The ringing of the opening and closing bells diminished in importance. The market itself changed venue and took up residence in the great computer conference in the sky.

Now running on global time, it is available to any person anywhere with a PC, modem, and phone line. The new market obliterates national boundaries and time zones. The existing physical markets may soon be replaced as the site of the action, for the real market exists on a totally different level. Like a tornado striking earth, the cybermarket now touches down at random points around the planet.

The British, always being a practical sort, perceived the logic of the turn of events, and closed their physical marketplace, located in downtown London. Nonetheless, the Brits are scarcely out of the action. They are plugged in 24 hours a day.

Life in the average British brokerage house is also quite different, and it looks very much like the Millennium Organization. High Learning is commonplace, if for no other reason that one is placed immediately and constantly on the high wire of international finance. One false step can be more than painful, and no day is like the preceding day. Whether or not High Play has actually filtered through the British reserve is open to question, but given the boiler room environment, keeping a stiff upper lip at all times is stressful at least. It is safe to say, however, that Appropriate Structure is increasingly the order of the day in those houses thriving in the transformation. Layered bureaucratic decision-making structures, built in another

age and maintained for old times' sake, are not sufficiently agile to keep pace with the market. As for the authenticity of the community life, that is rather difficult for an outsider, particularly an American, to assess, but there is no question as to the primacy of Spirit, particularly when the cheers go up for a "Bloody good trade."

The appearance of the Millennium Organization is by no means limited to the financial area. Everywhere the stakes are high, the issues complex and conflicted, the working groups diverse, and the moments of decision imminent or past, the conditions are ripe. Those organizations which are actually going to make it into the next millennium are capitalizing on these conditions and midwifing the birth of the new organizational life form. There are others, of course, who are resisting the moment at all costs, and their long-term future is predictably short.

In searching for signs of the Millennium Organization, one must bear in mind just how different the new organizational life form is from the old. As a consequence, the manner of its entry, or introduction, will also be different. In the old days the advent of organizational change was announced by executive fiat, dictating the new structure, policy, or management philosophy. Introducing the Millennium Organization by proclamation of the president is totally antithetical to the spirit of the beast and would almost certainly insure failure. The Millennium

Organization grows from within, it is not laid on from the top. To be sure, senior management has an important role to play in terms of recognizing the early signs of its appearance, encouraging its growth, and preparing for the long term nourishment and development. In performance, the role looks much more like a midwife than a drill sergeant.

The answer to the question, "How many Millennium Organizations exist today by virtue of executive order?" is: none. A more useful question would be, "How many Millennium Organizations exist, if only in embryo?" and I think the answer is millions. Let me go further. All existing organizations are moving along the road towards the Millennium Organization. Some are further along than others, a number will abort the journey en route, and more than a few never wanted to start in the first place. But those that make it to the next millennium will manifest a life form appropriate to the new environment.

### **Open Space Technology – A Foretaste of Things to Come**

The search for evidence pointing to the presence, or at least the imminence, of the Millennium Organization would not be complete without reference to Open Space Technology. Within recent years all over the world hundreds of groups, with thousands of people, have had a common experience which, in



prospect, appeared unbelievable. Retrospectively, the experience appears almost the normal, natural thing to do.

In one case, 500 hugely diverse people from across the United States gathered to shape the future of an old American institution. Prior to the meeting little was shared except their common membership and general agreement that something needed to be done. Despite the barriers to meaningful communication, this diverse group managed to identify and organize 169 task forces in less than an hour. For 36 hours they self-managed the enterprise, and by the end had produced 350 pages of proceedings which were duplicated overnight and ready for the participants upon their departure. Up-front planning time, except for matters of logistics, was practically nil. There was one facilitator for the total event.

As interesting as the base numbers from this event may be, the observed behavior was even more so. Learning was taking place in quantum jumps as people posed unaskable questions and devised unthinkable solutions. Furthermore, intense as the discussions became, there were still a number of people who reported that they were having fun. As for structure and control, both were totally appropriate to the task at hand, the people who performed that task, and the environment in which it all took place. After all, the people created the structure, and control resided with whoever had the passion and took the responsibility. As the

subject, group, and leadership changed, so did the structure and control.

The common bonding (otherwise known as community) which occurred during the several days was nothing less than thick. By the end hugs seemed to break out spontaneously, and farewells were often tearful.

The meeting of 500 has been replicated around the world literally hundreds of times. Meeting management literature and the conventional wisdom both agree: what happened could not have. Something very strange is going on here. It is called Open Space Technology.<sup>7</sup>

Open Space is an approach to human gatherings which is so simple it cannot break (well almost), and so universal that one does not have to explain the rules. The fundamental mechanisms are: 1) the Circle, 2) Breath, 3) the Bulletin Board, and 4) the Marketplace.

The circle is the fundamental geometry of human communication. Worldwide, when people gather in a circle they are well on the road to productive interaction. Place these same people in rows (classroom style) and they usually become quite passive or occasionally wildly aggressive. Change the configuration to a square or rectangle, and negotiation is the

---

<sup>7</sup> For all the details on the conception and development of Open Space, along with directions for use, please consult *Riding the Tiger* and *Open Space Technology: A User's Guide*. Both books are published by ABBOTT PUBLISHING.

mode of operations. The circle is the shape for real communication. After all, we do not have a square of friends or a family rectangle, do we? All Open Space Events begin in a circle. If there are 500 or more people it may be necessary to use several concentric circles, but circles nonetheless.

Sitting in a circle may be interesting, but is hardly productive until something starts to happen. "Stuff" has to come in and go out, the circle has to come alive or, as the British might say, "buzz." The image here is breathing.

One of the interesting things about breathing is that nobody has to tell you to do it. It comes naturally, and creates the basic rhythm which governs many of life's activities. A similar thing happens to a circle of people when it comes alive and there is a buzz. An internalized clock begins to run which calibrates the life of the group. It is typically invisible to outsiders and unrelated to any clocks on the wall. Group members are not too helpful either, for when asked why they did something at a certain moment a common answer will be, "Well it seemed like the right time."

Now if you are going to have a meeting with people accomplishing certain things, it is essential to get well beyond the business of sitting in a circle and breathing, all of which sounds quite esoteric and hardly businesslike. If "stuff" is going to come into the circle and go out, and something useful

happen, it is imperative that we know what stuff. It is equally important that we know when all those things are likely to happen so that proper arrangements can be made. It would also be convenient if we had a choice so we could be present for that which pleased us and absent from the rest.

There are two universal mechanisms that meet these specifications: the bulletin board and the marketplace. With the bulletin board we inform our fellows and peers what we are interested in doing. Through the marketplace we make arrangements to get it all done. Anyone finding a particular product or project of interest will be present.

In an actual Open Space Event, a bare wall behind the group becomes the bulletin board. The members of the group are invited to identify any area or issue for which they have some real passion (not just a "good idea"), and for which they are prepared to take responsibility, as in leading a discussion around that issue. The issues and opportunities, identified by the members, are written down on large pieces of paper along with a time and place of meeting, and posted on the wall. When all the items of concern have been posted, the marketplace is opened, and members are invited to come to the wall and sign up for as many issues as they want.

At that point, the essentials for productive communication are established, for everybody knows the topics, times, places,

and participants. After that it is up to individual initiative, and the gathering essentially runs itself. The keys of course are passion and responsibility. People who have identified their passions and taken responsibility for them typically get something done. That is the story of Open Space.

But the real story is that the amazing is quickly becoming commonplace. All over the world groups of vastly different sizes, composition, education, profession, culture and ethnicity, gender and sexual preference, age and national origin, share a common experience with Open Space. They know, because they have been there, that the 500 gathered to renovate their institution were not in the grip of some mass delusion.<sup>8</sup> It happened, it has happened before, and it keeps on happening. The "it" in this case is not just Open Space Technology as an exciting new meeting methodology, it is also a confirmed sighting of the Millennium Organization. The millennium is upon us and the Millennium Organization has arrived, thankfully a little early. It is clearly time to get to work in a very new way.

---

<sup>8</sup> The current experience of those using Open Space around the world, told in their own words, is to be found in *Tales from Open Space*, from ABBOTT PUBLISHING, and available in early 1995.



## Chapter V

### Jump-Starting the Future

There is a degree of inevitability about the Millennium Organization's arrival. Without anyone lifting a finger, some organizations are going to be fortunate enough to make the journey. Even with best efforts to the contrary, they will wake up one morning and discover that rather like the caterpillar emerging as butterfly, they have become quite different. The how and the why of this transformation lie buried in the mists of human evolution, but the final state is indisputable. Like it or not, the Millennium Organization is made manifest.

Of course other organizations will not be so fortunate, and they probably constitute the majority. Add a certain randomness to the whole affair and the possibility of survival for your organization is open to some question. For those interested in raising the odds in their favor, a level of proactivity is in order. But what to do?

Playing by the old rules, the answer is quite clear: the senior executive mandates the new organizational form. Naturally there is a major training program to equip all participants with the needed tools, combined with an infinite number of meetings at all levels to assure proper implementation. When all is in readiness, somebody cuts the ribbon and in comes the new reality by whatever name: Quality Circles, TQM, Learning Organizations, Virtual Organizations, Circular Organizations, Matrix Organizations, and so on. There is no question about who is in charge, and the execution is crisp and precise.

That is playing by the old rules, but as we have noted the rules have changed. The old notions of control and being in charge do not work as well as they used to, if at all. Furthermore, the one completely infallible way to insure that the Millennium Organization will never arrive is to order its presence. It may be invited, allowed, welcomed, but never ordered.

As an alternative, consider holding an Open Space Event. The opportunities are virtually infinite, the lead time practically none, and the costs, compared to other ways of doing business, almost ridiculous. The benefits, however, are considerable. Instead of talking about the Millennium Organization, studying about it, training for it, or commanding its presence, one simply



takes note of the obvious; it has arrived. And life proceeds from there.

Open Space Technology is appropriate wherever certain criteria are met. The presenting issues are complex, conflicted, urgent, and the people involved diverse in their backgrounds and positions, while simultaneously caring deeply about the issues and their resolution. Prior agreement about anything except for the importance of the focal area, and the necessity of getting something done, is unnecessary.

Open Space Technology is inappropriate in situations where the answer is already known, somebody at a significant level thinks she or he knows the answer, or the "boss" in the situation is the sort of a person who *must* know the answer.

Once you have identified an area, it would be reasonable to ask who should attend and how many. The simple answers are: *whoever cares* and *as many as it takes*. Some degree of practicality may intrude itself here, although Open Space has worked effectively with groups ranging from 5 to 750. Thus in the majority of cases you will long surpass the number of interested participants and the capacity of available space before you reach the limits of Open Space. There are even ways of raising the participant limit through the application of computer-conferencing technology.

For your first Open Space effort, it is probably neither wise nor necessary to go for a world record. But do not let large numbers of angry people concerned with complex and conflicted issues throw you off. Open Space will work there, too. In fact Open Space will work especially well in such a situation.

When you are ready to take the plunge, there are a number of ways to go. Two books noted earlier, *Riding the Tiger* and *Open Space Technology: A User's Guide*, will provide what you need to get started. *Tiger* describes the conceptual background, and *The User's Guide* supplies the nuts and bolts. If, however, creating Open Space is not exactly your cup of tea, but you still think it is a great idea, rest assured there are a number of competent facilitators around the world. (A telephone call or note to the author will get the ball rolling.)

Please Note: Open Space Technology is not a proprietary product of H.H.Owen, or anyone else. It is freely available to anyone who cares to use it. There is only one requirement, please share your experience.

The important issues are to get on with the business and to know that the business can be done. Before departure I would reemphasize one point. *The only way to kill an Open Space Event is to think that you can control it*, or to be perceived as controlling it. If you are in any way attached to the specific details of the outcome, stop right where you are! You may be

absolutely right, and there may be only one way to work the issue. If so, go for it, but **do not use Open Space**. Open Space under such circumstances will only annoy the people, frustrate you, and produce a minimal to disastrous result.

A similar, and possibly more subtle, negative indication for Open Space is those situations where you may be *perceived* as being in control. Carefully done, it is quite possible for the "boss" to be the facilitator, and in fact I would argue that this is a proper new role for a "boss" to play. So there is potential advance here, but also danger. To the extent that perception is nine-tenths of reality, as is often the case, your best intentions may well go unnoticed, obscured by what the people are sure must be the case, that you are in charge.

There is an easy way out of this. Have somebody else facilitate the event, leaving you to become 100 percent participant. The next time Open Space is done, it is quite likely that the problem of perception will not arise, and you can do it yourself.

So much for cares and cautions. If you are interested in facilitating the arrival of the Millennium Organization, Open Space can do the job. It makes no difference when it is done, how many are involved, or what the issues. When Open Space is created, the Millennium Organization is experienced. People then face choices: do they wish to do it again, do it better, do it

all the time? Those are choices, but one choice is not available: whether or not to experience Millennium Organization. It has already happened, and that single, significant fact cannot be denied.

## **From The Open Space Event to the Millennium**

### **Organization**

Moving from an Open Space Event to the Millennium Organization is only a matter of changed perception and the recognition of an existent phenomenon. It may, therefore, be easy and instantaneous, a blinding flash of the obvious. Alternatively, for those who do not have the eyes to see, or do not choose to use them, the passage may be fraught with difficulty and ultimately impossible.

There is an interesting phenomenon, common to every group I have worked with in Open Space. Prior to the event virtual universal agreement exists that Open Space is a wonderful idea, but it will simply never work with *this* group. Such an opinion is hardly surprising given where most of us have come from. Little in our prior conscious experience prepares us for the actuality of Open Space. No wonder we find it unbelievable prospectively.

Truly a wonderment is how fast the unbelievable becomes the accepted and commonplace. Prior to the start of the event, a clear majority deems it impossible that a group such as their own could actually create an agreeable, highly complex agenda in less than a hour, and then self-manage it for the full course of the meeting. Several hours after the meeting has begun, these same people treat the impossible as the commonplace, and simply cannot imagine being unable to do what they did. As an example of rapid adaptation to changed circumstances, all of this is grand. However, to the extent that the Open Space event is effectively going to become a launching pad for the Millennium Organization, a higher degree of conscious awareness is essential.

**Remembrance and the Medicine Wheel** Increasing awareness can best be achieved with a little reflection, which may be enabled by taking a few moments at the conclusion of the event to look back upon the experience as a whole. People are tired at that point so a lengthy exposition on the accomplishments to date is counter-productive. By using a profoundly simple model drawn from the Native American tradition, it is possible to anchor the new experience in a positive and powerful way. Enter the Medicine Wheel.

The Medicine Wheel is to be found all across the North American continent, and although the details may vary from tribe

to tribe, the central concept remains the same. The people say that each individual and all groups have four necessary elements, represented by the four points of the compass, different colors and animal symbols.

To the north is Leadership. The color is red and the animal is the deer, a hard charging deer, bursting through the forest with power. To the east is Vision. The color is blue, and the animal is the eagle, a soaring eagle taking everything into awareness. To the south is Community, the color is yellow, the color of sun and warmth. The animal is the mouse, not as in "mousey" but as in warm fuzzy. To the west is Management, the color is green and the animal the bear. Not a big, mean, angry bear, but the slow, methodical, eating berries in the berry patch sort of bear, just taking care of business.

With this simple schema, the process of reflection may begin. Ask the people what they noticed about the quality of Leadership that was strange or different during their time in Open Space. Typically, the first response is to say there was no leadership, by which they meant there was no leadership of the old sort – a single person, or small group, in dominant command. This first statement is quickly amended to indicate that actually there was an abundance of leadership, exercised by all parts and levels of the assembled group. None of it was appointed: all of it simply emerged as a natural expression of the group identity,

in conjunction with the task at hand. Most of all, it worked without undue conflict, and such conflict as there was arose over matters of substance and not turf.

Next on the list is Vision. Ask the people what they noticed that was strange or different about Vision in Open Space. More often than not, there is no immediate response to this question, for it apparently does not occur to people that the power of the process they were engaged in has its roots in vision. Not some abstracted vision produced by a committee, or handed down by an etherial being, but real, live, down-to-earth vision which emerges when people identify their passions and take responsibility for them. Eventually it sinks through that all those pieces of paper on the wall, detailing the issues of passionate concern to the people, have created a powerful collage depicting a vision of the future. The power of that vision is demonstrated by its capacity to shape and form the group's behavior.

Then we come to Community. Ask the people what they noticed that was strange and different about their experience of community in Open Space. Not uncommonly people will simply smile at this question, not because they think it is absurd or ridiculous, but rather it suddenly occurs to them that despite their apprehensions, to say nothing of a possible, negative history with the assembled group, they have been having fun. And

the operative word is *fun*. People really say it, and from all appearances, they mean it, even in some of the tightest, scariest situations. People who have fun together are, to my mind, the very definition of community. I simply cannot imagine an effective community that was not a fun place to be. Not all the time mind you, nor always at the same level of intensity, but community without fun is like water without wetness.

Last stop is the West and Management. Asked what was strange or different about the function of management, it is not uncommon for people to draw a blank. They recognize that they had never even thought about it, and it was a nonissue that somehow took care of itself. If pressed, the folks will acknowledge that this situation is at wide variance with prior experience where management details consumed all available energy, even at the expense of actually getting the business done. There is a point here. When Leadership is powerful and shared, the vision clear, and people are having fun, management is a nonissue. That is the experience of Open Space. It is also the reality of the Millennium Organization.

With reflection complete, the group has effectively acknowledged its accomplishment. Not only has it manifested a style of meeting that is efficient, effective, and even fun, it has also, and most importantly, demonstrated its capacity to perform at superior levels. If necessary behaviors for the



emergent age include self-management, personal empowerment, individual responsibility, codesign, and continuous communal learning to name a few – all of them have put in an appearance. The only questions are: do the people want to do it all again, would they like to do it better, and on an ongoing basis? All of that, and more, is possible, but it calls for the continuing growth and development of the new organizational life form, the Millennium Organization.

## Chapter VI

### Sustaining the Millennium Organization (The Power of Story)

If Open Space Technology provides a viable means to experience a new organizational life form, the question emerges, how do you sustain that life form. Put in less formal terms, what can we say about the care and feeding of the Millennium Organization? How do we support this new way of being in organization?

The question is infinitely easier to pose than answer because it may not be precisely clear what the Millennium Organization is. In Open Space we can experience its presence, and after the fact we may describe its characteristics (such as High Learning, High Play, and Genuine Community), but the essence remains obscure.

A major piece of the difficulty lies in the fact that size and structure, two of the fundamental characteristics that once delineated the nature, or essence, of an organization, no longer seem to be critical. The structure of the Millennium Organization will vary with the times and the task, and indeed multiple structures can exist simultaneously. Should one ask what is the *correct* structure, the answer is pretty straightforward and not very helpful: anything that works. By the same token, size is also noncritical, and it turns out that the optimal size is whatever it takes to get the job done. Judging from the experience in Open Space situations, the difference in dynamics between groups of 5 and 500 is virtually nothing.

So what is the Millennium Organization anyhow? We previously suggested, but did not develop, the notion that the critical factors were more a matter of style than substance, more spirit than structure. That notion can no longer be avoided if we are to deal seriously with sustaining the Millennium Organization.

Our previous experience tells us that sustaining any organization requires *institutionalization*. Once the excitement and thrill of a new start fades, it is time to get down to business. Determine the right structure and implement the necessary controls. With the correct structure and tight control, identity is secure and organizational stability established. Unfortunately, in the case of the Millennium Organization, doing

what we have always done will yield a result completely antithetical to our intention. We will effectively kill the organization.

Back to square one. What is the Millennium Organization essentially? Answer: Spirit becoming manifest in time and space.

Stated baldly in such terms, it may sound as if we were about to ascend to the heights of esoterica or the depths of trivia. Neither needs to be the case, for the statement is only an iteration of the previous point about the primacy of Spirit.

Under normal circumstances we would prefer not to talk about Spirit, referring to it as the "soft" side of things. To be sure, at the annual sales meeting (or equivalent) the call goes out for an inspiring speaker, and in odd moments we acknowledge inspiration and charisma to be essential characteristics of leadership<sup>9</sup> but please, let us not over do it. Well the times are not normal, and talking about Spirit with intelligent precision may be the most useful thing we can do.

Taking the bull by the horns, calling a spade a spade, and spirit Spirit, let me say it again. The Millennium Organization is, in its essence, Spirit becoming manifest in time and space. It is not just Spirit in general, but Spirit which has coherence, power, directionality, and focus. In its presence useful work gets done, characterized as spirited or inspired performance.

---

<sup>9</sup> Inspiration literally means to in-spirit, while charisma is understood in many circles to be a gift of the Spirit.

Those involved enjoy what they do, for work and play are not in opposition, but two words for the same thing: outstanding and productive human behavior.

If the essence is Spirit, how do we get a handle on that to the point that we can actually do something for, with, and about Spirit? We know, without being told, when the Spirit in a place is terrible. By the same token, when Spirit soars, it does not take a psychologist to recognize the condition. But we have a very hard job saying anything more definite about the condition of Spirit, and an even harder job in doing something about that condition. In the end, we treat Spirit pretty much like the weather, something you have to put up with. If sustaining the Millennium Organization is important, however, we will have to do better.

### **Story: The Key to Spirit**

The best way to capture Spirit is with a story. The truth of this statement is known to every child who has ever sat in rapt attention as a good yarn is unrolled. The facts of the tale, while interesting, do not seem to make that much difference, and since good storytelling seems to require a certain disregard for the literal truth, the noncritical nature of the facts is

probably a good thing. But the power of story to reveal the reality of the Spirit is palpable.

If stories take precedence over facts, it is patently apparent that the realm of the Millennium Organization is quite unlike anything we ever expected, or were trained to deal with. But this should not come as a surprise. Under the old rules, we were counseled to take charge, to assume control. But there is no control. Our jobs were defined in terms of clear borders and hard boundaries, which apparently do not exist except in our imagination. Perfect organizational structure, the Holy Grail of management, disappears in a wisp of Spirit. And now it is suggested that stories take precedence over facts. As Dorothy commented to her dog Toto after the tornado whisked her from Kansas to the wonderful land of Oz, "Toto, this is not Kansas."

It is a strange new world, and possibly sheer madness. And yet there is a certain familiarity about it. We have been here before, and maybe we never left. If so, there is some good news. Equipping ourselves to thrive in the land of the Millennium Organization is less a matter of learning something totally new than of remembering what we already know. In the present instance, that means remembering, and indeed honoring, the power of story to reveal Spirit. It is also appropriate to give story its proper name: myth.

From the dawn of recorded history, and presumably before, humankind has been mythmakers. Not long ago myth was consigned to the ash heap of human experience, along with primitive superstition, alchemy, and other exotica of earlier times. But thanks to the likes of Joseph Campbell, we now understand that mythmaking may be the most important human activity. Whenever we have something truly important to say, combined with the necessity to understand the reality of which we speak, we tell a story about it.

Unfortunately, infatuation with the facts and the insistence that serious discourse requires a strict adherence to the literal truth make it impossible to give stories their true weight, or to hear the truth as it is spoken through myth. To ask if profound stories (myths) are true is to misunderstand the core reality of story. It is never true, it is never false, it is behind both as the arbiter of truth and falsity. Our mythology, our stories, create the context within which we judge the true to be true, or the reverse.

The world of mythology, supposedly magical and fantasmic, is often contrasted with the world of science, in which rational discussion, based on hard facts and correct theories, peels away the miasma of occult superstition. Unfortunately, or fortunately, science, as all other serious human endeavors, is fundamentally rooted in storytelling. Only in science, stories are called

theories, and to ask whether a theory is true or false is to misunderstand the nature of theory making. Theories are never true, they are always arbitrary approximations assembling the relevant perceived facts, in order to make some sense. Theories are likely stories.

The issue is not truth or falsehood, but simply: Does it work? Are we helped to understand the reality we have encountered or not? Can we do something useful with it?

We may even have several theories about the same thing which are apparently in conflict, but both work in different circumstances. Which theory you choose will depend on what you want to do, and how you want to understand it. For example, ask any physicist whether light is a wave or a particle. The answer is whichever one you want. It depends on your interest and what you want to accomplish.

Storytelling, theory building, mythmaking. All are different words for the same activity: our common effort to explore, describe, and understand the deepest elements of our collective realities and experience. But how, you may ask, can story manifest Spirit?



## **The Art of the Storyteller**

In a curious way, Spirit is manifest in story by what is *not* said, in the silences, the voids, the open spaces. The qualities and reality of Spirit inevitably transcend our ability to give them expression. We learn time and time again that words, literal words, just will not do it. But there is a way of using words in order to move beyond words, and therein lies the art of the storyteller.

A good storyteller, surprisingly enough, is a person of few words, or at least as few words as possible. The rule is: less is always more. Only sufficient language is laid out to indicate the general conditions, environment, and actors present. Abundant space is left for the imagination of the reader. If the storyteller fills everything up with his or her own words, there simply is no room left for the reader or hearer to *get into the story*. This slang phrase has an enormous amount of wisdom behind it. Since a good story is always the product of a cooperative effort between teller and listener, if the listener does not get into the tale, nothing significant will happen.

Yet when that powerful connection is made, the wonders begin. With the reader "hooked," the story commences to create its own reality with a unique sense of time and space. It is not so much that we are told *about* the Spirit of that time and that space, but rather we actually encounter that same Spirit. Through

some marvelous alchemy, the creative powers of the storyteller combine with the force of our own imagination to transmute the everyday moment into something infinitely rare and inspiring. Of course, this does not happen every day, but even once in a lifetime can be sufficient to set one on a new course with new meaning.

If all of this sounds beyond the realm of possibility, remember a time when you found yourself totally absorbed in a gripping tale to the extent that you forgot an appointment or some other essential task. When reprimanded for the offense you probably said something like, "Sorry about that, but I just forgot the time." In fact that is not true. You did not forget the time, you were engaged in another time which occupied you completely. Stories, even those between the two covers of a book, create time and space. The powerful stories of our lives, our mythologies, create the time and space in which the Spirit of our organizations becomes manifest. To hear the story is to encounter the Spirit, to be part of a unique time and space. Not to hear the story is to be out of it – literally.

## Mythology and the Creation of Organizational Identity

Every organization, no matter how large or small, has a limited number of stories which define the ethos of that place. It is not accidental that a usual first question asked by a new hire is, "What's the story." Until you know the story, or more accurately the stories, you are quite literally at sea in a foreign situation without the fundamental knowledge necessary for navigation in that place.

Psychologists ask three questions in order to determine the mental health of a person, relating to time, place, and person. If you do not know *when* you are, and *where* you are, it is very difficult to know *who* you are, which means that at the very least you are confused. New members in an organization are every bit as much at sea until they are grounded in the special time and space of that place. This grounding will occur only when they hear the story. Until then, they may be pardoned if they act a little strangely.

Unless the organization is very old or very careful, it is quite unlikely that the operative mythology will be collected in an official version. The stories involved will appear almost ordinary and their significance will be lost on all but the initiated. Indeed, that is one of the marks of being a member of the organization, that you recognize the importance of the story.

All the rest of the world either does not notice, or perceives the story as somehow weird. The "weirdness quotient" is a good indicator that you are in the presence of somebody else's mythology. What they take very seriously, you will find to be just plain strange. At the macro level, Christians find the stories of Shiva downright odd, while the Hindus often fail to see why the Christians get so excited over Jesus who was apparently God. After all, according to the Hindu story, we are all a manifestation of God.

Rarely, if ever, do organizations have only a single story. More typically there are five or six that are drawn upon as the members have need of understanding who they are, or explaining themselves to the outside world. In times of moral challenge, you will hear stories of how the leaders in the old time did the "right" thing. Few people would make the mistake of doing exactly what the leaders of yore did, but when you hear the story you experience the flavor, the Spirit, of what it is all about.

In ordinary conversation, the myths tend to pop up as examples of how things should be done, or how things are around here. Outsiders, coming into the organization, will notice that everybody seems to be using the same examples. The members, on the other hand, will probably not be aware of these similarities. From their point of view, the chosen examples are just the natural thing to say.

Upon becoming aware of what the important stories are, it is confusing to note that they are often in apparent contradiction. For example, there can be powerful stories of intense competition alongside equally powerful stories of genuine compassion. All of which starts to make the point that organizational mythology does not function in a linear, logical, or we might even say, rational fashion. The several conflicting stories function by creating a dialectic, tension, or polarity, within which the Spirit of the place becomes manifest. Tales of hard-fought competition and gentle compassion establish the boundaries of the organization, the field of play, as it were.

To see how all of this works, several analogues may be helpful. Just suppose that the organization is a drumhead and the several stories the tuning handles on the rim which create the appropriate tension. Too much tension and the drumhead will break, too little and the sound is mushy. Going for a happy medium and zeroing out the tension will do little good, for then the drum, will not sound at all.

There is another image even more appropriate and useful for understanding the internal function of this strange creature, the Millennium Organization. It is the magnetic crucible used for refining metals. When extraordinarily high levels of purity are essential in the final product, contamination occurring when the metal being refined comes in contact with the material of the

crucible is unacceptable. To reach the highest levels of purity it is necessary that the metal being refined be held in space without visible means of support. This magic is accomplished by the careful focusing of magnetic fields, each of which exerts a pull sufficient to hold the metal, but not so great as to draw it from the center of the area.

Organizational myths and their relationship to the Spirit of a place are like the magnets in our example. Each myth must contribute its own special flavor, but not to the exclusion of the others. It is only in combination, and in tension, that everything works. Like the crucible holding formless liquid fire in space, organizational mythology bounds the Spirit of a place, giving it meaning, focus, and identity.

## Chapter VII

### Mythic Wholeness

#### And the Power of the Millennium

#### Organization

The effective power of an organization is directly and fundamentally related to the quality of its mythology. Like the DNA in a living organism, mythology creates the conditions and context from which all organizational activities originate. Healthy organizations will have a mythology providing an appropriate basis for operations in the given environment. Listless and floundering organizations will have a mythology appropriate to a different environment, usually one that no longer exists. Sick organizations will have a mythology marked by dissonance both with the environment and internally.

## **Organizational Health and Mythic Wholeness**

The mythology of a healthy organization will acknowledge and honor all aspects of organizational journey, the good times as well as the bad. In the enthusiastic rush surrounding the discovery of culture's importance to the organization (and myth is a fundamental part), it was often thought that only the pleasant stories should be remembered, the times the team won and the organization prospered. After all, who would want to be bothered with tales from the dreary days of failure?

This judgment might sit well with the spin-doctors, and others charged with putting the best face on things, but as a prescription for creating a healthy mythology, and from thence a healthy organization, it is a disaster. Of course it is nice to learn from the annual report that failure never occurred, but what do the folks do on that inevitable day when difficulty, and even failure, rears its ugly head again? There is no memory, there is no lesson from the past. The Spirit of the place is left to its own devices to muddle through. It is true that every situation is unique, and muddling through on your own is a necessary discipline, but it is helpful to know that somebody has been down a similar road previously.



Although each organization will have its own particular mythology, the mythologies of all organizations are identical on one point. They tell the tale of the organization's transformational journey from the days out in the garage, or wherever it all began, up to and including whatever imaginable future may mark the horizon. Good mythologies from good organizations will tell it all. Organizations of lesser power tend to forget the hard parts.

The plot line in all cases is fundamentally the same. It begins in what are often referred to as "The Good Old Days," which have the quality of the naive, dreaming innocence manifest in the Garden of Eden story prior to the eating of the apple and the "fall of mankind." Everything was perfect in those distant days, and although there may not have been a great deal of money in the bank, this deficit was more than made up for by a fullness of soul. All were busy, and they enjoyed what they did – an exciting time.

Then came "The Troubles." The Troubles appear in multiple guises, but no matter what their mask, they represent a radical challenge to the future, indeed to the existence of the organization. For businesses, The Troubles will appear as a ravenous competitor, a radical change in the technology, the shortsightedness of the banks or venture capitalists. No matter

what the source, The Troubles put everybody on the edge. It is, to quote Dickens, "the best of times and the worst of times."<sup>10</sup>

It is the worst of times because the old way of doing business, no matter what that may have been, is challenged and essentially set aside. With its demise comes no small amount of suffering, soul searching, dislocation, and pain. In contemporary jargon this is downsizing, restructuring, right-sizing. No matter the words, it hurts.

It is also the best of times, for as the organization and its members are forced through the caustic bath of The Troubles, everybody comes to recognize what is really important. It is back to basics with a vengeance. And the basics in this case are usually spoken of as the core business, the core technology, what we really know and do – all of which may have gotten lost in that time prior to the Troubles.

There is an even greater gift which comes during the time of The Troubles, and that is reawakening, and recognition, of the essential Spirit of the place. When the superficials are ripped away because they are unaffordable or just plain inappropriate, everybody gets a chance to see what lies at the heart of the matter. It is often remarked that while nobody would want to do it all again, and certainly would not do it by choice, nobody

---

<sup>10</sup> Dickens, Charles, *A Tale of Two Cities*, Book I, Chapter 1, 1859.

would have missed it. This is the time of heroes, heroines, and heroic action.

Eventually The Troubles end, and a Fresh Start begins. While there is a connection to the old organization, there is also the pristine, pungent newness of a fresh spring morning after a long hard winter. If people are given to song, song almost inevitably breaks out. Of course most businesses, until recently, have been too dour to let that happen (more the pity), but you do notice a lot of whistling on the way to the coffee pot combined with an irresistible tendency to smile.

With broad variation in detail the organizational story of transformation is repeated all over the globe. This should come as no particular surprise, for what we are observing in microcosm with our organizations is the evolutionary journey of humankind through its multiple transformations.

The universality of this pattern is nicely brought to our attention by Joseph Campbell in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.<sup>11</sup> Although each individual and every organization always feel that their journey is unique, which it is, it is also a reflection of the species' journey from the dawn of history to whatever fulfillment lies ahead. Our major traditions speak of life, death, and resurrection, or some such words. But if those

---

<sup>11</sup> Campbell, Joseph, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, (Bolligen Series, Princeton, 1949).

words make you uncomfortable, no problem. **The Good Old Days, The Troubles,** and **Fresh Start** will do just as well for our purposes.

Organizations which either omit, or get stuck, at some part of the journey will predictably have problems in the current life. For example, those who omit The Good Old Days, on the grounds that they are no longer relevant to the present moment, find that they have little, if anything, for an anchor when the winds of change blow hard. More often than not, The Good Old Days are banished by a senior executive who has been brought in to make a clean sweep and a new start. But as we learn repeatedly, those who cannot remember their past are often condemned to repeat it.

It is also possible that an organization or a select group of its members will become fixated on some part of their mythology. If that fixation occurs around The Good Old Days, the possibility of relevant engagement with the contemporary environment is radically diminished.

Occasionally, people will get stuck on The Troubles and the stories cycle around and around in an enervating spiral. It is most depressing, and one wonders why, if things are really as bad as people say, the folks should stay around. The answer may be that these people actually like and need their situation in a sad, masochistic fashion. As long as they can feel miserable, and

blame that misery on somebody else, there is little need for taking responsibility for their own situation.

Getting stuck in The Troubles is almost always a case of arrested Griefwork.<sup>12</sup> Griefwork is the process we all go through when dealing with the ending of some important person, institution, or way of life. It has a predictable set of stages beginning with Shock/Anger. Those who are stuck in The Troubles typically have not passed beyond the first stage. They are still in shock/anger, and perversely seem to be enjoying it.

The full cycle of the organizational mythology, from The Good Old Days to Fresh Start, is less important for its details than for its total sweep. It is only when considered in totality that the *quality of the journeying* begins to come through.

If only one part of the journey is remembered, a very partial, distorted picture emerges. This may be contrasted with an organization that honors its past, acknowledges its pain, and celebrates the victories. That is a whole organization with a whole and healthy mythology. It also ends up being very powerful and adaptable, capable of maintaining its identity though a multiplicity of environmental circumstances and formal manifestations.

---

<sup>12</sup> For a full description of the process and its application to organizational life, consult any one of my prior books, *Spirit: Transformation and Development in Organizations*, *Leadership Is*, or *Riding the Tiger*.

Wherever that organization appears, and however it seems to be operating in that appearance, there is never any question in the minds of the members, or the external observers, about the identity of the players. They know who they are, feel easy with that knowledge, and are quite prepared not only to engage a radically transforming world, but to enjoy it.

### **Complexity and Focus**

The description of the essence and function of the Millennium Organization drawn to this point has been overly simplistic, but laying out the full degree of complexity from the start would have produced a mind-boggling monster. We may now be in a position to honestly name the creature.

Starting from the fundamental position that the Millennium Organization is essentially a quantum of Spirit manifest in time and space, we have now moved to a place where it should be possible to understand how the organization maintains its identity even though in constant movement, passing from one formal manifestation to a new one. It is the mythology which provides the definition and boundaries of this Spirit and communicates the qualities of its journey, and the style of its presence in the world.

So far so good, and it is all pretty clear. But from here on out, things become quite different. We now need to come to terms with the fact that the picture offered is a simplified abstraction. The reality is not so much different as vastly more complex and confusing. In the first place we must recognize that in any given organization there are an infinite number of additional organizations (departments, branches, divisions, and such), all of which have their special mythologies, style of operations, and characteristic Spirit. Furthermore, the boundaries between these organizations and the larger one, as indeed between the larger one and the greater set of which it is a part, are all totally permeable.

The level of complex interpenetration is so high that it is almost impossible to visualize except in elemental terms. We have a situation where an infinity of fields of Spirit all interrelate. All organizations that are, or have ever been, of every size, are present in each moment and in all places. Clearly Toto, this is not Kansas. Nor is it Newtonian physics from which our prior understanding of the nature of organization arose.

In the physics of Newton, it is axiomatic that two bodies cannot occupy the same space at the same time. For Newton's is the world of closed systems and impermeable boundaries. The world of high energy physics, imagined by Einstein and friends, is radically different. There all systems interpenetrate, boundaries

cease to exist for all practical purposes, and everything is present everywhere, all at the same time.

To catch something of what is going on here, ask yourself how many radio and TV stations' signals are present in your immediate environment. The answer will be a number much larger than one.

If you raise the ante and ask how many coherent messages are available to you right now, the answer is virtually an infinite number. Not only can you access the major national and international networks, but all the local sources as well, and that is just the beginning. Add transmissions from distant galaxies detectable by radio telescopes, along with the echo of the Big Bang from the moment of creation some 15 billion years ago, and you begin to get the picture. It is quite a lot to sort through, but interestingly enough it can be done, and it is called focus or tuning.

### **Tune In to Turn On**

In a radio, TV, or even a radio telescope, we use a tuning device, which enables us to focus on a particular signal and simultaneously exclude all others. Or at the very least, we are able to consign them to the background. Thus from the chaotic possibilities of any instant, we may draw out the coherent



patterns of one particular field of radiation, which is then magically transformed from pulses of energy into the evening news or our favorite football team.

Something very similar takes place in our organizational life. We have available to us a virtually infinite variety of "spirit fields," each bounded by a unique mythology. By the simple, or at least apparently simple, mechanism of shifting our attention from one field to the next, we can effectively become available to that field. It is by no means necessary that we be physically present in the space where a particular field has its normal locus, and time also can be contravened in some interesting ways.

Exactly how this shift of attention works, I do not have the foggiest, but we all manage to do it. Furthermore we know when we are doing it well, which is known as "paying attention." We also know when we are doing it poorly, which is called "not paying attention." We can learn to do it better, which is called "learning to focus." With practice, we can expand the "area" we are paying attention to, and thereby learn to participate in a multitude of Spirit Fields simultaneously. Those of us who learn to do all of the above in an outstanding fashion are recognized as awesome, strange, or even mystical.

Stripped to essentials, and stated baldly as above, the very ordinary capacity to pay attention is the way we get along in the

world everyday, as strange as it may seem. When a person goes to work, their attention shifts to the mythology (stories) of the workplace. In an instant, and often simultaneously, they may attend to the whole organization, their division, department, branch, or work team. With a slight tweak of the "attention dial," they can access their national, religious, or ethnic mythologies along with those of their immediate family, local pub, club, or post office.

Spirit appears in different ways in each one of these fields. What I do at home is typically not the way I would behave in the board room or on the shop floor of my company. What I do in the bar may not be exactly what I would do at home. And none of the manifestations of Spirit described to this point would be appropriate in my mosque, church, temple, or synagogue.

How ridiculously obvious! Children can work their way through all this. True, and is it not absolutely wonderful how we manage to navigate in such mind-boggling complexity, and never even think about it? And there is the point: we never *think* about it. Were we to think about it, it is entirely likely that we would become so confused that we could not function. Faced with the complex interpenetration we have been considering here, the poor old mind just shuts down. Indeed, the largest computer systems in the world could only do a very superficial job of

tracking what is happening. And yet each one of us does it every day. Now that is marvelous!

### **The Point of All of This**

We are, individually and collectively, the stories we tell. It is our mythology, in all its infinite variety, that bounds the multiple fields of Spirit in which we participate. When the mythology is strong, complete, and well told, organizational identity is secure, no matter what changes there may be in size and form. And we – each one of us – effectively participate in the Spirit so long as we pay attention, which is not to be confused with thinking. Sustaining the Millennium Organization is therefore a matter of learning to tell our story well, and enhancing our capacity to listen and pay attention.

## Chapter VIII

### Telling the Story

It is time to get practical. Very practical. If it is true that the stories we tell in our organizations shape and define the Spirit and function of those organizations, telling the story well is a very practical and essential aspect of organizational life. Indeed, it may be the most essential and the most practical. Absent the story in a useful form, and the organization behaves pretty much like a jellyfish. At best it spreads all over the place with little sense of identity and purpose. At worst, the organization simply ceases to exist.

#### **What's the Story?**

The task begins at the beginning, with a very simple question: What is the story? Remember we are not trying to write a corporate history, although the story will contain elements of history. But if all we have are the facts, and never reach the heart and soul of the matter, the net result will be considerably less than optimal.

The useful source material for delineating the story will not be found in the dusty archives, but rather in the living memories of those who have created the organization and continue in the creative act. This could be almost anybody, and is certainly not limited to senior officials who view themselves as the keepers of the tale. Their version will be important, but of equal validity are the tales of those who occupy an infinite variety of spaces and places in the organization. For example, receptionists (who have been on the job for some period of time) are a wonderful source. The dispatcher in the distribution center is another likely person to consult. In fact, anyone located at the action points of the organization, where the daily comings and goings are to be witnessed, is a prime candidate.

Also to be consulted are the newcomers. As strange as it may seem, new recruits who have only been on the job for a matter of weeks will often have an excellent perspective. It is true they do not have all the juicy details, but because they are new, they will have a special sense of what is happening. And no wonder, for until they have some acquaintance with the story, they will have little idea of what is going on and what it all means. The typical newcomers, if they have any intention of becoming permanent members of the community, will be just like sponges, picking up tidbits and nuances long passed over by those who have been around for some time.

When seeking to know the story, it is imperative to listen to the broadest range of folks possible. This imperative for breadth may seem like an impossible barrier to the effective completion of the task. After all, if it is necessary to consult with everybody, the job will probably never get done. Fortunately, the necessity for a broad representation can be handled on a random sampling basis with relatively small numbers. Even in organizations of several thousand members, a group as small as 25, and certainly no larger than 50 will do, *provided it is truly representative.*

Small samples are possible because of a very simple and interesting fact. Each person in the organization is rather like a small portion of the negative for a hologram.<sup>13</sup> Every person, to the extent that they are active, participating members of the organization will have the whole story. They have to, or they could not effectively participate in the life of the organization.

But also like a piece of the negative of a hologram, each person represents only one perspective, their own. To see the whole (hologram or organization) in all of its infinite variety you will need all of the pieces, but even a relatively small

---

<sup>13</sup> If you are unfamiliar with the magic of holography, this analogy may be less than useful and a footnote will scarcely provide all the details. In essence, holography is a laser-based technology which allows one to photograph any three-dimensional object in its entirety, and then create an image of that object which apparently hangs in the air, and around which one may move in order to see all sides. The negative of the photograph may be cut into small pieces, any one of which will give a reasonable picture of the object, but only from a limited perspective.

number will provide an accurate rendition, at least sufficiently accurate to draw the general outlines and get on with the business.

## **Collecting the Stories**

The most accurate and efficient way to collect the stories of an organization is through a series of interviews with a random group from the organization. I sometimes call this a Noah's Ark sort: two of everything. The precise number does not make a lot of difference, and by the time 10 to 15 individuals have been interviewed, the tales have been essentially identified. Additional interviews are more a matter of confirmation and politics. Thus if one continues on through another 10 to 15 interviews and finds no substantial variation in the results, it is a safe bet that the story has been received. On the other hand, if major variations or additions appear, add interviews until the situation stabilizes. Deciding when enough is enough is always a judgment call, and while it may be possible to statistically validate the findings, I am not at all sure there is any added value. There comes a point when you hit the end of the road and it is pretty obvious.

My reference to *political* concerns those individuals in an organization who just have to be interviewed. Thus, if there are

two unions representing the workers of an organization, it simply will not do to interview only one of the local presidents. The same logic applies to senior vice-presidents.

**Interview Format** The purpose of these interviews is not to gather facts and figures, hard data so to speak, but rather to provide a safe, supportive environment in which people may tell the tale. It is important that they tell the story in their own way, and therefore rigidly structured approaches will not work. From a methodological point of view, the approach will look much more like that of a field anthropologist operating as a participant observer than anything else. While there is no one right way, my practice is as follows.

I ask each subject to set aside an hour and a half. We almost always use all that time, and quite often more. If possible, I like to do the interviews on the subject's turf or in some neutral area. To be avoided like the plague is the practice of summoning all subjects to some central interview room.

At the commencement of the interview, I explain that my purpose is to gather the tales of the organization as a means of engaging the essential Spirit of the place. I may take a little longer than that to lay out the details, but there is never any question as to why I am interested. And of course, I make it quite clear that should the subject, for any reason, feel



uncomfortable and wish to terminate the interview, that is fine with me, and no questions will be asked.

Once I have a green light, the subject is informed that there are only two questions: what is this place, and what should it be?

Rarely is it necessary to define "this place," as context does the job quite well. It is also an interesting piece of information if the subject defines the boundaries of the establishment in unexpected terms, which suggests that the official version of the story (what we are doing around here) is at some, and possibly some considerable, variance with the story in the streets.

While my interviewee is contemplating answers, I propose an interim question as follows: "While you are thinking of your answers, it would be very helpful to me if you could share a bit about who you are, and how you came to be here." Obviously I am searching for a little biographical information which will be useful for the interpretation of the tales as told. But I am also, and most importantly, providing the opportunity for the subjects to tell their own tales, an opportunity that few can resist.

In short order the conversation is completely centered on the subject, where he/she came from, how long ago, education, major happenings along the way to the future. As if by magic, the

hour and a half for the interview evaporates and never once do I return formally to the two questions I proposed at the outset – what is this place, and what should it be? The reason is a simple one. There is no need. As the individual's tale is told, there emerges simultaneously that person's perspective on the organization as a whole, the times of triumph and the times of trouble. The detail may be quite thin, covered only with words like, "I arrived just after the . . . and was it ever (exciting, awful, boring, stimulating)," but there is no question that you are listening to the echo of a defining moment in the life of the organization, the sort of stuff myths are made from.

One story, once told, by a single person does not a myth make, even if that person happens to be the CEO, chairman of the board, or managing director. Nor does a single telling lead inexorably to the soul of the organization. However, if you hear this tale told again and again as you go through the interviews, you can be certain that you are in the presence of the organizational mythology and close to perceiving the reality of Spirit. It is then only a matter of keeping score. How many times did you hear this tale and who told it?

As the several interviews progress and the defining moments are laid out on the table, an expanding picture of the organizational mythology makes itself apparent. What the people choose to mention as significant to their life in general, and in

the organization, gradually assumes a pattern. Out of all of the possible moments of significance to the organization, certain ones have been retained in the collective memory. One may question their accuracy, indeed even their historicity, but one cannot

question their presence in the mythology as a powerful and formative force for the Spirit of that place.

It is useful at this point to iterate the difference between myth and history. With history we are concerned with the facts, nothing but the facts, so far as that is possible. Myth operates in a different sphere. Factual authenticity may exist or not, but that has little if anything to do with the power of a particular piece of mythology to shape and form the Spirit of a place. To complain that a certain myth is not true is to miss the point. For better or worse, good or bad, true or not, the myth is present. The only useful question is, what is the effect? How is Spirit imaged?

For example, if the organizational story is that management is only out for itself and concerned for its own well being, while leaving the business, customers, and employees to look after themselves, it does not take a special intelligence to intuit the level, quality, and character of Spirit in that place. If it then turns out that some of the managers are the soul of

generosity and compassion, they unfortunately will be seen through the spectacles of the myth as either frauds or wildly aberrant exceptions. For after all, the story is...

## **Analyzing the Story**

There are endless possibilities, complexities, and subtleties possible in the analysis of the organizational mythology, but at a working level, the situation is usually as clear as the nose on your face, and remarkably simple. To hear the story, or more accurately the constellation of stories, which provide the context and definition of organizational life, is to immediately experience the quality, characteristics, and power of the Spirit of the place. It does not take a lifetime of study to determine why one organization is focused, powerful, and effective, while another is just plain sad.<sup>14</sup>

A few examples will make the point. In one corporation an oft-told tale related the favorite aphorism of the CEO when

---

<sup>14</sup> It is not my intent to denigrate the enormous and useful contribution made by those who have given their lives to the study of mythology. The Jungs, Campbells, and Wilburs of this world have opened our eyes to deep powers and realities which are normally invisible in everyday life. Seeing mythology through their eyes is a supremely enriching experience. But it remains true that myth is the story of the people and is therefore immediately accessible to all sorts and conditions of folks, regardless of length of study or degrees attained.

speaking of his employees. Said the CEO, "Never turn the asylum over to the inmates." It is not surprising to learn that in this institution trust levels were low, matching an abysmal degree of innovation and creativity. The fact that nobody could ever remember actually hearing the CEO say such a thing is quite beside the point, and very much in line with the way myth typically works. But that was the story, and it had a daily, deadening effect. Challenging this story in terms of its history would only bring raised eyebrows, for it was something that everybody knew. True (historically) or not, it both reflected and formed the quality of the Spirit of the place.

At the other end of the scale are a pair of stories from a very different organization with a very different Spirit. The organization is a shipyard called the Jonathan Corporation, about which I have written previously in *Spirit: Transformation and Development in Organizations*. The first story, known as the USS Spear, relates how the corporation's first major contract resulted from massively underbidding the competition, and then against all odds, completing the work for less than the bid price and well ahead of schedule. In the process everybody, from the president down, was involved in a hands-on way. The conditions were hideous, but work continued around the clock as steel plate was welded, riveted, and painted, as freezing rain coated all work surfaces with treacherous ice. In abbreviated form, you may

still sense the degree of challenge and the pride of accomplishment. It would not surprise you, therefore, to learn that life at Jonathan was an exciting and challenging experience.

From the same organization comes a quite different story revealing and forming yet another quality of Spirit. This one was known as Norma's Apartment. Norma, a secretary, suffered a total loss when her apartment was burned out. Within 48 hours, with no official solicitation, money and goods appeared from all over the corporation, and Norma was back in business. The moral is clear: these folks cared for each other in adversity, and that caring was a core value.

Please note in passing how weak declarations of core values sound in comparison to the power of a good story. With these two stories (and just a few others) framing the field of Spirit and constituting part of the vocabulary of every person in the corporation, speeches about dedication to the job and taking care of each other were unnecessary.

### **Sustaining the Story**

For organizations to function effectively over time, it is essential that the story be told in a powerful and appropriate fashion. Only in this way will organizational identity, focus, and purpose be maintained, and the Spirit kept at high levels. In

the two organizational examples cited above, it is apparent that the first is not a candidate for maintenance. Indeed, changing the story is necessary, and we will deal with the practicalities of that effort in a subsequent chapter. But when the story is a good one, suited to the times, tasks, and condition of the organization, it should be sustained.

Good stories are rarely, if ever, sustained by words alone. Although many people assume that effective communication begins and ends with verbal statement, nothing could be further from the truth. Somebody, somewhere figured that 95 percent of all communication occurs nonverbally. I cannot cite the source nor prove its validity, but it certainly reflects my experience. Stories have words, and words must be spoken (written), but that is just a small part of the total job. Even stories committed to the printed page, and usually only seen in that form, improve when read aloud. At that point all the artifice of a good storyteller comes into play.

Many people simply "don't get it" in words. They have to see it, touch it, taste it, smell it, and get their arms around it before the story has lasting reality for them. Thus an effective telling of the tale demands the appropriate involvement of multiple aspects of human sensibility.

One of the most powerful, and probably least effectively utilized, avenues of communication is smell. The perfume industry

understands this, as do the women who artfully use the fragrances. A lot of people, including many women, take smell as an incidental at best, and more often a negative. To say that something smells often suggests that it smells badly. So, when approaching the task of telling the tale, a first question might be, how does it smell?

In the case of the USS Speer, the smells are powerful and pungent: hot metal, fresh paint, and the sea. Conjure up those three, and you hardly need to say a word. And if the story is told verbally in the presence of such smells, the impact can be almost overwhelming. The association between the story and the olfactory information is powerful to the point that just a whiff carries people right back into that situation. Not all stories have a distinctive smell, but when they do confirming and reenforcing that association will add a whole new element to the art of storytelling.

Many people will not appreciate the impact of a tale until they can touch it. Call it tactile listening, or whatever you please, but appealing to these folks requires the sensitive use of artifacts that communicate the reality of the situation in sensual terms. Using the example of the USS Speer once again, such an artifact might be a piece of steel plating which had been welded into some significant shape. Obviously, steel plate is not something that you can carry around in your back pocket for



everyday use, but such an object could be located at a convenient spot where the primary storytelling takes place, and then small pieces provided to each of the participants as souvenirs, perhaps with the organizational logo stamped thereupon. If the small piece of steel were made into some useful form such as a key chain bob, it might then find its way into the pocket and become a constant daily reminder of the central story.

At this moment, you may be thinking that the forms of storytelling proposed thus far are hardly sophisticated, high-tech inventions, and of course you are right. Religious groups have for centuries used incense to appeal to the olfactory lobes of believers to carry them deeply into the central mysteries of their faith. Likewise from the dawn of time, people have carried small physical reminders of special places and times. In the contemporary scene, the tourist industry has made an exceedingly profitable business selling trinkets and tee shirts for souvenirs (French for "memory"). All of which makes the point that storytelling, in all of its forms, is a very ancient art. We may have a few modern bells and whistles such as print, audio, and video, but none of these can ever replace the power of a significant smell or the impact of a physical reminder.

Next on the list of nonverbal modes of storytelling is movement. When the body itself is invited to participate in the hearing of a tale by engaging in a series of significant

movements, learning and remembrance take place on a deep, not to say subliminal, level. The formalization of this mode of storytelling is dance, but unfortunately on the contemporary scene, dance is largely a spectator sport. Dance on the stage by professionals can produce a potent effect, but it absolutely pales before the power of actually involving the listeners in the act. I am not sure what the operative mechanisms are, but when the story is manifest in movement it sinks deeply and permanently into the consciousness of those involved.

The last item on our list is sound. What does the story sound like? We are not talking about words here, but rather the intrinsic melody, rhythm, and tonality of the tale. Not all stories have such a sound, but thinking once again about the USS Speer, we might imagine an abundance of sonic messengers, ranging from the toot of harbor tugs to the throaty roar of oceangoing vessels. To this we could add the scream of seabirds and the staccato rhythm of the riveting gun. Noisy for sure, but sure to provide a surrounding experience, anchoring the tale in our aural memory.

At long last, we are ready to talk about words and the actual methods of presentation. It has been my experience that the number of words must be kept to an absolute minimum, sufficient to set the stage, provide the continuity, but no more. Taking such a minimalist approach is ordinarily not a problem,

for the central stories of any organization tend, by nature, to be short and pungent. It must always be remembered that we are not attempting to create a history with all the relevant facts and figures. There is a place for such an undertaking, but not when imparting the core mythology. The job at hand is to create a nutrient environment in which the participants may experience, in a most immediate way, the Spirit of the place. This task may be accomplished only with the cooperation of the participants, and it requires that their imaginations be fully involved. The sensory and verbal elements provide the context and stimulation, but for appropriation to occur, the imaginations must be engaged. If successful, the story will no longer be an interesting tale, external to the life of the listeners, but rather an internal, core reference point, an active force which shapes behavior and inspires performance. Exactly how the story is told will depend in large part on the circumstances under which the telling is to take place.

### **The Occasions for Storytelling**

In order to sustain the identity and focus of the organization, it is imperative that the story be told often and well. All significant moments of organizational life present an opportunity, and in between there should be some daily reminders.

**Initiation** The first important occasion for storytelling is the point of initiation for new members. More often than not, this moment of organizational life is passed by with only a brief, dull, and boring orientation program, devoted largely to such earth-shattering subjects as the employee benefit program, personnel policy and procedures, and the like. While all this information may be useful, it is fundamentally irrelevant until the people have some deep idea as to why they are there, and what *there* is anyhow. Only the story will provide such definition and grounding.

If ever there was a time when the storytellers of the organization should be summoned, and their collective versions of the tale orchestrated into a meaningful fabric, this is it. In choosing the cast of characters, seniority and position in the organization are not the sole criteria, and indeed, they may not even be the most important ones. The critical issue is the skill in storytelling and a capacity to relate effectively to the listeners. While it may be important for the CEO or managing director to make an appearance, if this person is very reserved, or worse yet, a stuffed shirt, assigning him or her the prime role will simply not do. Find those people who are able to create that magic space in which the listeners' imaginations soar and

become actively engaged in the encounter and internalization of the Spirit of the place.

The possible formats are many and are ultimately dictated by their appropriateness to the organization. The way one might tell the tale in the Jonathan Corporation will be markedly different than in a bank, brokerage office, or government agency. Absolutely to be avoided, however, is the standard practice of gathering all of the new hires in a lecture hall or cramped, stuffy conference room where they are arranged in rows before a seemingly endless procession of talking heads. The possibilities of inspiration under these circumstances are limited.

Appropriate settings include the shop floor, the distribution center, or the lobby in the corporate headquarters. There is no abstractly "right" setting, but the listeners should be relatively comfortable and in a situation which itself is communicative of the story. Thus, going to a local hotel may provide comfort but adds little to the story, unless of course you happen to be in the hotel business.

The designation "listeners" for the participants is accurate to a point, but may suggest a role that is entirely passive. Passive listening rarely if ever enables real communication to take place; snoozing is a more likely outcome. The sort of listening I have in mind here is active to whatever level that is possible. Under the best of circumstances, the presentation of

the organizational story should be much more like improvisational theater with everybody involved if only with "bit parts," than like a spectator sport with participants engaging at a distance.

Last, be sure to tell the whole story, warts and all. Telling the whole story has nothing to do with the amount of information that is passed onward. Rather, it concerns the breadth of the tale. When all is done those in attendance should not only be able to talk about, but feel themselves present in, the entire range of organizational experience, from the best of times to the worst. The story, after all, is the remembrance of the transformational journey. A steady diet of "success stories" may look good in the annual report but does little to prepare the folks for the ups and downs that lie ahead.

**Organizational Celebrations** Most organizations have parties. It may be the Christmas bash or the annual corporate picnic, but every so often the members are summoned for some sort of gathering. Unfortunately, this gathering may be marked more by the consumption of spirits than the raising of Spirit. This is not a plea for abstinence, but exercises devoted primarily to mutual anesthesia are scarcely uplifting. Extreme formality is not the order of the day either. Parties should be fun, but they should have a purpose, which in this case would be the telling of the tale, best done with a dash of humor and lots of High Play.

The actual formats are limited only by the imagination, but they might include a costume party in which members are requested to come dressed as some organizational hero, heroine, or other significant personality in the collective mythology. The characters represented need not all be good or positive ones. Surely there is a place for demons of the past and present, the competition, a stray corporate raider or two, even a senior executive.

Alternatively, or in addition, the occasion presents a marvelous opportunity for the standard "roast" or cabaret-style review. One organization I knew did it all with a song with a catchy refrain that everybody could sing. The intervening verses told the story with puckish delight, and each year new stanzas were created.

The timing of this party is very important. The annual Christmas party may be appropriate in a Christian environment, but for purely secular organizations, or organizations grounded in a different tradition, the Christmas season does not make much sense. A more useful date will be found relating to a significant point in the organizational year. The government tax office in Australia, for example, celebrates the end of the tax year, a moment of special significance to them.

**Telling the Story Daily** If the story is only rolled out on the first day of employment, or even annually for the organizational celebration, it is likely to fall from active remembrance. Daily reminders are not only in order but essential. This is where organizational artifacts can have real impact. Objects and representations (photographs, awards, paintings, prototype products) placed in strategic locations all over the organization (not only in the executive suite) bring the story to mind again and again.

**Standard Mechanisms** When seeking to tell the tale, one should not overlook the traditional modes such as the newsletter and the annual report. Both publications have a part to play, though they cannot carry the whole load. Unfortunately, many organizations believe they have done it all through this means, but that is insufficient.

### **Practice Makes Perfect**

There is not one right way to tell the tale, nor is there a magic formula. Each organization and every individual within that organization, will have a different approach, and that is as it should be. The suggestions offered above are simply that. Applying them to your situation will take experimentation and practice. I have tried to lay out a range of considerations that



I have found to be important. Doubtless there are many more which you will discover as you proceed. The important part is to proceed, even if somewhat tentatively. Mistakes will be made, but in retrospect they will be seen as experience; the important thing is not to repeat them. So tell the tale, and watch the Spirit become stronger, focused, and truly powerful.

## Chapter IX

### Changing the Story

When the organizational mythology is powerful enough to effectively focus the Spirit on the task at hand, while simultaneously providing a sense of identity and purpose, that story must be sustained. Circumstances change nonetheless, and stories, like everything else on this earth, have a certain span of life. By careful attention to the health of the tale and its evolution, it is possible to extend that life-span, but eventually, for one reason or another, serious renovation is in order.

Such was the case in the organization described at the beginning of the last chapter. As you will remember, the core of the story was a saying of the CEO, "Never turn the asylum over to the inmates." The "asylum," of course was the company, and the "inmates," the employees.

Any attempt to mitigate the impact by proving that the story never happened or saying that the CEO did not mean what he reportedly said inevitably has little effect, and often exacerbates the situation. To say that it did not happen, or was

not meant, is to miss the point. Regardless of the historical facts, the story reflects the way people feel. If that were not so, the story would not have been repeated and assumed a place in the organizational mythology. Denial of the story by "official sources" is most likely to confirm it indelibly, and be seen as one more example of the shady tactics expected from senior management.

The story in our example emerged at the end of a long period of dictatorial control exercised by all levels of management. In many ways the CEO was the least offender, although his statement, or alleged statement, was picked up as a clear indication of the "way things are around here." The net effect was the elimination of creativity and innovation from the company environs, replaced by a deadening fear of change and the inability to exercise responsibility. Nothing could be done until approved by the highest levels, which of course took forever. What else would you expect from people who came to think of themselves as inmates in an asylum?

Interestingly enough, the corporation had developed the reputation as one of the best managed in the United States, and from the point of view of efficiency, effectiveness, and profitability, as understood at the time, that reputation was justified. The company was making money, lots of it, and who could argue with that?

Even a superficial investigation revealed, however, that corporate profitability had much more to do with the luck of being in the right place, at the right time, with the right product, and virtually no competition – than any superior skill in the management area. The product was insulation and the halcyon days occurred during the energy crisis of the 1970s when OPEC's dramatic oil price increases drove a mad scramble for energy efficiency. For a time the company virtually abandoned all sales efforts in favor of an informal program to ration product to favored customers. When things are going that well, it is tempting to think that they will continue for ever. It is even more tempting to think that you (management) did it all by yourself and are therefore in a superior position from which it is possible to degrade those who are working with you. The employees become *inmates*, and with a subtle twist of irony, the company becomes an *asylum*.

As all things come to an end, the market slacked eventually, competitors appeared, and the joyride was over. At such a time, responsible, innovative effort is the only bulwark standing in the way of corporate downfall. Unfortunately, the Spirit had gone underground, innovation had taken a holiday, and fear, well mixed with stress, was a constant companion. The only good news was that the inmates had not taken over the asylum.

Changing the mythology of an organization is not a job best handled by a massive public relations campaign. Press releases proclaiming a new day and the advent of inspired, creative performance tend to have a hollow ring. Stirring speeches exhorting all employees, lately known as inmates, to superhuman levels of performance fall on deaf ears. A new story emerges only when there is a fundamental change in the self-perception of those involved, and that can only occur with a basic shift in the way things are. New stories, at their genesis, are a function of *being*, not telling.

Here we confront a difficult and interesting challenge. Without a positive, powerful new story the Spirit of the place will persist in its previous condition, and that condition will continue until the Spirit *behaves* in a new way. The possibility of improving the situation with incremental, linear steps is precluded by the fact that there is no logical connection between the prior state and the desired state. A radical turnabout is essential.

The CEO's story is one of impotence told in order to maintain the omnipotence of senior management. It is the ultimate putdown, and even though it may have appeared first as a joke, and even been thought of that way, in fact it is a very sick joke. The first step towards change may be the hardest. It involves the fundamental recognition and admission on the part of

management, especially senior management, that they do not now have, nor did they ever have, control. The emperor is naked.

Such admissions do not come easily, and for many people they will never come. However, until the illusion of control is abandoned not very much can take its place. Halfway measures will not do it, and half-hearted attempts are worse than no effort at all. Both will be perceived as inauthentic, a further example of the duplicity of those at the top.

Many of the current efforts around job redesign, empowerment, team building, employee participation, and self-managed work groups provide painful examples of such halfway, half-hearted measures. The stated goals are laudable, but the execution leaves much to be desired. Scratch the surface rhetoric and you will perceive yet another effort to maintain control, or regain it should it have been lost. Same song, different verse, and the Spirit of a place is not to be fooled.

Spirit does not respond well to commands, orders, or executive directives, it marches to a different drummer called inspiration. Inspiration only comes in the form of an invitation for growth and development in a nutrient environment of respect, an Open Space where genuine fulfillment is a real possibility. Once such an invitation has been given and received, consensual conditions are established in which the tools of authority, commands, orders, and executive directives, will now actually

function. No longer grounded in fear, authority is based on the common sense that the common good will be well served.

### **Open Space to the Rescue**

Open Space Technology can be an effective way of telling the new story. It is certainly not the only way, but it holds some obvious advantages. It is fast, effective, simple, and inexpensive. Start with any significant business issue, invite whoever cares to come, and get out of the way to let it all happen. The results will surprise you. Not only will the business issue receive substantive, innovative treatment at the hands of people who have taken responsibility for their passion, the event as a whole will become a story in itself.

For all those people who felt outrage at being treated like inmates, the experience in Open Space will come as a sweet reward, validating their claim to a higher level of effectiveness. For all the others who found themselves subtly influenced by the story to the point that they began to think of themselves as inmates, bereft of freedom, and absolved of responsibility, Open Space comes as a wakeup call. They are challenged and free to realize their potential. Doing otherwise is a matter of their own choosing.

The manner in which the decision to utilize Open Space is implemented will be a clear litmus test of management's resolution of the control issue. There is exactly one way to derail an Open Space Event, and that is to attempt to control it. This derailment can actually start with the invitation, before the event itself ever gets under way. If the invitation is issued in the style of the old days, a memo to all employees commanding their presence, it is clear that nothing but the rhetoric has changed. An effective invitation is a *real invitation*, meaning that it can be refused. Voluntary self-selection is the rule.

If the role of senior management in this situation is no longer to command the troops, one might wonder, what should management do? The answer is distressingly simple: as little as possible. Most usually it is quite sufficient that senior management *allow* the Open Space Event to happen. Anything more is not only unnecessary, but usually counterproductive. Of course their participation is also welcome and presumably contributory.

When introducing a new story, intended to be productive of new organizational behavior, it is useful to remember several factors. First, no organization or individual likes to change. Even if the change is perceived as positive, good old inertia typically rules the day. Should the effects of the change be unknown or perceived as negative, strong opposition must be anticipated. A second factor is that neither status nor



reputation is sufficient to authenticate the story, and thereby insure its introduction to the organizational mythology. Thus if the CEO announces the new tale from the heights of Olympus, all will nod their heads and go off to do exactly what they were going to do anyhow. A similar fate awaits the outside guru who is brought in to buttress the tale with supposed expertise.

In summary, it is safe to assume that the organizational antibodies will make every effort to kill off the intrusive novelty. It is also safe to assume that some outside expert will have little if any positive impact. Success will be achieved only when the new tale has reached that marvelous status of being valid because "everybody knows..." No longer open to question, the story is simply part of the woodwork, fully integrated into the life fabric of the organization.

For best results it is useful to consider a number of Open Space Events, in series or simultaneously, each one dealing with a separate business issue appealing to different populations in the organization. There should be more than three of these events and less than seven. While the details of each event may be vastly different in terms of substantive discussion and concrete outcomes, the overall impact will be remarkably the same: people taking charge and doing good work.

The logic of the seemingly mystical *three and seven* becomes clear if you think of the organization as a still pool of water,

and the Open Space Events as thrown pebbles, creating ripples on the surface where they land. Throw one pebble into the pool, and the radiating ripples quickly mark a track which may be followed backwards to the point of impact. If that pebble were a single Open Space Event, it would be very easy to mark the spot and neutralize the invader. Throw two pebbles into the pool, and while the ripples become more complex, it is still possible to trace them back to their point of origin. Once you get beyond three or four pebbles, thrown at widely separated points, the complexity of the ripple pattern makes it impossible to discern the precise points of origin. If instead of ripples in the water we have ripples of news spreading through the organization, bringing information about the several Open Space Events, we now have the desired situation in which the value of each event is confirmed by the reports of all other events. No longer is it a question of a single source or a single authority. We are now in the desired state where something is true because, "Everybody knows..."

Following this logic to its apparent conclusion, it might seem that if a few Open Space Events were useful, more would be even better. Strangely, this does not work, and in fact one reaches a point of diminishing returns. A similar phenomenon is experienced when we send memos to everybody about everything and find that nobody reads any of them. The reason is that news has

turned to noise in precisely the same way that throwing a whole handful of pebbles into the pool so fractures the surface that meaningful information carried by the discrete ripples is no longer available.

There is a limit to the number of Open Space Events that any organization can digest. But curiously enough, there does not seem to be a limit to Open Space. What happens is that Open Space moves from the status of "special event" to "the mentality of this place." It becomes, in short, the way we do business around here. At precisely this point the story has been effectively changed and retold, and importantly, the Millennium Organization has put in an appearance.

## Chapter X

### Listening

Telling the tale is critical to the sustainance of the Millennium Organization. That tale, however, becomes effective only when heard, and that requires listening. Listening, unfortunately, is not one of our stronger capabilities. Somehow the need, or desire, to fill up all available space with our own concerns makes true listening an activity foreign to many. Those who believe themselves to be "in charge" think it necessary to tell everybody precisely what to do. Those who consider themselves "not in charge" fill the airwaves with criticism of the status quo, or just tune out. It is not a pleasant or productive situation.

So why listen? From the point of view of the organization, the rationale is quite clear. Unless the folks pay attention, the whole thing falls apart. As individuals, we also have an enormous stake in the quality of our listening. It is called meaning, purpose, and ultimately, personal identity.

Active listening, a critical element of all profound dialogue, creates the environment in which each of our personal existences emerges. Martin Buber helped us to understand that *I become I only in relation to a thou* – another person who is treated as a person. Community, conversation, dialogue, relationship, and, yes, organization – are therefore essential to the formation of me as a person.

Buber says, "All real living is meeting,"<sup>15</sup> a powerful statement of an obvious truth. What else would we be doing in life if not meeting our fellows? Yet somewhere along the line we developed the flawed notion that the individual can, and does, exist in lonely isolation. The simple truth of the matter is, apart from our relatedness through organization, we are nothing. To demonstrate the validity of this statement, explain who you are *without reference* to any organization – family, job, country, profession, and so on. Like it or not, you and I truly exist only in relationship, and relationship begins with listening, and grows in organization.

The Beginning of Listening

---

15 Buber, Martin, *I and Thou* (T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1937).

Listening begins with a question or, more accurately, a quest. Initially and overtly, the question is a simple one: the desire for a particular piece of information or details regarding an already known phenomenon. But at its root, the quest is the search for meaning, the desire for some solid position relative to time, place, and purpose. It is the age-old search for answers to the elemental, existential questions: who am I, what am I doing here, and where am I going?

Only philosophers, and other such people, ask these questions *in general*, as they consider the destiny of humanity. For us ordinary folk, the questions are more usually asked in terms of a particular situation. On the first day in a new organization it is of more than incidental concern to know what my identity is in this situation, my function, and what I may expect down the road.

The presence of such questions, at whatever level of awareness, creates the conditions for receiver based communications. When the quest is active, and the questions are asked, an open space is created into which answers may fit. Dialogue becomes a possibility, and the story to be told falls on receptive ground. Absent such open space, answers are given to questions nobody has asked, and stories are told that nobody is interested in. The teller of the tale has the responsibility to insure that the quest of the listener is honored, and the

listener has the responsibility to be open and available; all begin with intention.

## **Intentional Listening**

Occasionally we are struck by a flash of the obvious. More often, fate delivers a sharp crack on the side of the head with a metaphorical two-by-four. In both cases we are catapulted into a listening mode whether we like it or not, but the cost is considerable. Fate can not always be depended upon to intervene prior to the advent of impending disaster. More often it is the disaster itself that captures our attention. There ought to be a better way.

Ultimately, listening is each person's personal business, and the process cannot be initiated effectively from the outside, nor forced to happen. The old approach of "shut-up and listen," is not workable. True listening begins only when we are ready. Clear, unambiguous intention is the first step.

On the surface it would seem that nothing could be easier than having the intention, or desire, to listen to what is going on in the world. Listening, however, has its price, which on occasion can be very high – we may hear, and having heard, be forced to change. Small changes are fine, but with the exception

of a radical few, major change at a personal level is not only exhausting, but can be very threatening.

Intentional listening, unfortunately, is not unlike buying a pig in a poke. You do not really know what you have got until you get it, and then it may be a little late. As we listen with intention, small seeds, unnoticed at the time, are planted. Suddenly and surprisingly, we experience a new idea which forces reconsideration of all other ideas. The process of change has begun and we hardly knew when, why, or how.

For some people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, intentional listening is something we would rather not do. At the same time, closing our ears has its price, condemning us to life in a prison of our own making. The walls of our comfortable perceptions give the semblance of security, but the world continues on its merry way, with or without our participation.

These days our choice is becoming more limited. Not terribly long ago, we listened intently perhaps once a decade, and in the intervening period life continued pretty much as always. Our present experience is rather different, and with the advent of the Millennium Organization, it is guaranteed to become even more so. As we move from an organizational environment marked by stable size and structure into one where constant flux is the



common, even desired experience, intentional listening becomes increasingly essential. But it is still a choice.

## **Attentional Listening**

Having an intention to listen, and listening with attention are related, but different. The former puts you in the right position, but it is still possible to miss the important messages. Concentration and focus, although essential are only a first step. The critical element is listening in a manner appropriate to the level of communication.

The levels of communication in an organization correspond to its developmental history. Each level has its own mode of communication and special way of answering the questions of those who might wish to become associated with the organization. The levels may be termed: Out-of-the-Depths, Vision, Language, Understanding, Data-Information. Corresponding to the organizational levels are appropriate modes of listening: Intuition, Passion, Aesthetics, Logic, and Common Sense. Out-of-the-Depths/Intuition Organizations start with a moment of inspiration. Someone, somewhere, sometime receives a message from out-of-the-depths. That message may arrive as a flash of possibility or in a more subtle way, and at the moment of reception, its shape, form, and precise objectives are far from

clear. It is more feeling than substance. The inspiration may pass, being a fleeting thought or, at best, a flash in the pan. But if it lingers and takes substance, it will be seen retrospectively as the moment of genesis, the point where everything began.

Engaging at the level of out-of-the-depths requires the full and deliberate use of intuition. Using one's intuition is not something to be worked on. As a matter of fact, for reasons best known to itself, intuition seems to work quite well regardless of what we do. The problem, however, comes in paying attention and trusting intuition, even though logic and common sense are apparently contravened.

Intuition works most effectively in silence. This is not a matter of the absence of sound externally, rather a question of interior quiet, no matter what may be transpiring in the outside world. Achieving that silence calls for effort and practice. For some people the way is through meditation or some similar approach, but deep listening requires that the incessant, idle, self-talk resonating in most of our heads be stilled. As that occurs, the intuition may make its presence known.

At the moment of communication people may talk about, "the way an organization smells," but that is only a manner of speaking. The reality communicated and received is much deeper and more fundamental than olfactory stimulation. Honestly, I do

not know what happens here, but I think it has a lot to do with the connection of the collective consciousness with the consciousness of the individual. Somehow the notion emerges: this is a good place; this is a bad place; this is a happy place; this place has deep pain.

It is virtually impossible to lie or fabricate at this level of communication, and so if the listener has his or her intuition in working order, the organizational spin-doctors should beware. Anything said later will be heard in the context of the message from out-of-the-depths. If later messages are congruent with the former messages, all will be well. If dissonant, problems of a profound sort are sure to arise.

**Vision/Passion** If the initial moment of inspiration lingers and gains power it must, and will, assume the form of vision. Vision has little if anything to do with the current fad for vision statements, worked out in endless committee meetings and countless draft versions. Vision is immediate and direct, appearing in colors and sounds, the phantasms of the imagination. The power of vision resides in its capacity to captivate and excite, not through a formal plan or detailed procedures, but in the sheer power, possibility, and energy manifested. To perceive the vision is to see the whole at once, albeit the details of implementation are less than clear.

Attentive listening to vision requires our passion. For all too many of us, passion is embarrassing. It seems messy and out of control. At best, passion is relegated to the private world of intimate relationships. Even there the fires of passion are to be dampened and ignored. And yet passion is truly the engine that makes our world go around. It is the energy that drives our quest for personal and organizational fulfillment. Life without passion may be orderly and superficially secure, but it is also consummately boring.

When we listen with passion to the vision of the Story, there is one question. Does this vision turn me on? Doubtless there are more circumspect ways of phrasing the question, but all of them blunt the impact, and this is one point where circumspection will not do. When vision excites passion, things do tend to get out of control. The old order, whatever that may have been, is up for grabs and in its place appears active commitment and action framed by a new reality.

**Language/Aesthetics** Caught by a powerful vision the unavoidable response is to seek its expression in a meaningful way. First efforts usually fail, and even repeated attempts demonstrate that nothing can do full justice to a vision. But sooner or later a reasonable approximation is achieved, and an appropriate and workable language is developed.

The language of the organization consists only partially of words. Also included are expressive movements and gestures which might be seen as dance, along with special objects and spaces, the artifacts and theater of organizational life. Words take their place as a way of filling in the details.

Effectively engaging the language of an organization requires our aesthetic sense. Aesthetics is the appreciation of the beautiful and the determination of the opposite. Organizational language, in all of its forms, marked by coherence, constancy, variety, and power, which is neither overdone nor bland, will be seen as beautiful to those caught up in the vision and grounded intuitively in the depths of the organizational life. For others the same language will be perceived as incongruous or weird.

It is said that beauty resides in the eye of the beholder, and nowhere is that more critically true than in the present situation. The perception of beauty is the acid test of membership and the basis for allegiance, and no amount of effort will overcome the distaste born of organizational ugliness. For example, drivers in the transportation business find trucks to be objects of art, worthy of adoration or condemnation, but never to be taken neutrally. For the rest of us trucks are just trucks. All of which goes a long way towards explaining why some people make a life work of driving trucks, and others would not be

caught dead in the beasts. Pilots seem to feel the same way about airplanes, and computer scientists about computers. It is not a matter of intuition or reason. It is pure aesthetics, the perception of beauty.

**Understanding/Reason** From language comes a logic, which gives birth to the possibility of understanding how all the pieces fit. It is important to note that the emergent logic is not an abstract, pure form, but rather the rationalization of the language itself. The logic and the consequent understanding are thus fourth-order derivatives from the original out-of-the-depths experience, manifest in vision, and captured by language. In context, the logic will make sense, and understanding is possible. Remove the context, or change it, and everything is reduced to gibberish or worse.

Engaged listening at the level of understanding becomes possible and effective only when we use our reason to the fullest, which is not to be confused with the application of an abstract standard of what is *logical*. What makes sense in one organization is totally without meaning in another.

In a family-owned business, for example, business decisions will inevitably grow out of the logic of the family, and certain people will hold certain positions because they are family members, and not because of some abstract quality of performance.

To suggest that such a practice is "bad business," may be correct, but that does not make it therefore "bad *family* business." One may, or may not, wish to become associated with a family business, but once in there is a logic which applies.

**Data-Information/Common Sense** Given a workable language and a reasonable understanding, the context is established in which the data of experience may be assembled as useful information. It is now possible to quantify efforts and enumerate results. Products may be counted, return on investment calculated, and progress, or the lack of same, assessed. But note well, context is everything. Data and information, presented independently of the context, are absolutely without meaning.

Engaged listening at the level of data-information requires common sense. With the context supplied by the preceding levels, the discrete pieces of organizational life now make real sense. No longer are they perceived as a confusing mess of facts and figures, but rather a coherent pattern descriptive of a unique organization in a particular situation. Meaningful and contributory participation in the life of that organization is possible.

Although data-information and common sense come at the end of the line, they are by no means trivial. There is no such thing as *just data-information* or *simple common sense*. Indeed, this is

where the "rubber meets the road," and action takes place. Intuition is wonderful, passion is fantastic, aesthetics divine, and reason exquisite, but until everything comes together in data-information, as perceived by common sense, it just is not happening.

### **The Practice of Listening**

Rome was not built in a week, nor can effective listening be achieved on the first try. Learning to trust your intuition, embrace your passion, appreciate beauty, apply the discipline of reason, and follow common sense, takes repeated attempts and no small amount of failure. The net result is the emergence of a practical awareness of how things work and what they mean. We discover who we are, what we are doing here, and something about how it will all turn out in the end.

Simultaneously, the Millennium Organization will have gained a fully functional member capable of operating effectively in the new environment. Effective listening to powerful storytelling creates the conditions under which the Millennium Organization will thrive and endure.



## Chapter XI

More...

The story of the Millennium Organization is an ongoing event. At this point we only have the early reports, and for sure there is much, much more to come. Breaking news items are likely to come at both ends of a scale represented by esoterica on the one end and practicalities on the other.

### **Practicalities**

The Millennium Organization will create all kinds of confusion with the nuts and bolts of organizational life such as compensation, status, and position. At present, all three of these important items are determined by several factors including the amount of time on the job (seniority), experience, skill, education, rung on the career ladder, and the number of persons supervised. In the Millennium Organization, these determining

factors will be considerably harder to define with precision, and in some cases may totally disappear.

**Seniority** In the old days, and even fairly recently, the presumption was that you came to work in a given organization and remained there for period of time, usually a long time. In many cases you were assigned an employee number which told everybody just how long you had been there. With the advent of the Millennium Organization, it becomes increasingly difficult to say exactly where *there* is. As the environment (market) shifts and transforms, so also will the organization, assuming multiple forms in multiple places, sequentially and simultaneously. Unlike the old arrangements in the Closed System, boundaries are no longer understood to be impermeable, clearly separating inside from outside, here from there. Specifying just how long somebody has been *here* is not a cut-and-dried affair. Or was it *there*?

I am not suggesting that the problem presented is insoluble, only that it is insoluble under the old terms. For the moment we seem to be operating under an interim arrangement which allows us to separate inside from outside, here from there. But it is worthwhile noting that this interim arrangement is increasingly arbitrary, and therefore on shaky ground. Sooner or later it will become quite important to resolve the issue. Are they **in** and

hence compensatable, or **out** and not compensatable? Or indeed, is there some third possibility we have not even thought of yet?

**Career Ladders** Then we come to the whole business of education, skill, experience, and ascent up the career ladder. Used to be that we knew pretty exactly where we were. One started at the bottom, and worked the way to the top. There was a series of graded steps, each with a prescribed body of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Precise educational programs could be offered, and the results could be tested. Whenever you were ready for a higher level of duty, simply take the courses, pass the tests, and you were on your way. Or so it said in all the personnel policy handbooks.

Of course we all knew things did not quite work that way, but the notion of a career ladder was a comforting fiction. At the very least it has kept a large number of academic and training institutions in business, and employed a much larger number of academics and trainers, who without that fiction would have had to seek alternate employment.

There is absolutely no question that competent individuals are essential to the Millennium Organization, as they were in the predecessor organizations. But the attainment and measurement of competence is going to be accomplished in very different ways. The poor old career ladder is getting shaky for reasons that are

not hard to find, and can be summarized by an often quoted, but impossible to verify, statement: 50 percent of the jobs that all of us will be doing in five years have not even been invented yet.

At issue here is the advent of High Learning as a core characteristic of the Millennium Organization. High Learning, you remember, is that quantum leap from one state to a new one. Call it breakthrough, call it innovation, call it a mess, but it plays absolute havoc with the normal learning that was going on previously.

In the good old days we certainly had our moments of High Learning, when the perceptions of reality shifted radically. But those moments were normally followed by long periods of Normal Learning, when the latest shift was rationalized, compartmentalized, carved up, and analyzed, eventually making an appearance as a new discipline with a definite body of knowledge, set of skills, and appropriate attitudes. It was then possible to attend school, learn what was needed to be learned, get a degree or certificate, go to work, and claim your rightful position on the career ladder.

Things are not that way anymore. With every transformative moment comes a new opportunity for High Learning, which in turn must be followed by Normal Learning in order to clean up the mess and get things organized. This process is not new. What is new is

that process is repeating itself in shorter and shorter cycles. In some areas, such as high technology, the moments of High Learning lap each other to the point that Normal Learning virtually gets squeezed out. It certainly is exciting, but not exactly what we have been led to expect. If career ladders are based on normal learning, and the period for normal learning is reduced to a momentary breathing spell between one breakthrough and the next, the life-span of a career ladder is predictably short.

Compensation and organizational position based upon career ladder status has a very shaky foundation. Again we seem to be getting by with an interim agreement which permits us to overlook the rate of change and the general irrelevancy of our measurement tools. But the day will come, probably sooner than later, when the issue of fair and meaningful compensation will no longer allow us to get by with this interim agreement. It will be necessary to squarely face the questions of competency measurement.

**Leadership and Supervision** A common way of calculating the reward due to employees was based on the number of other employees they supervised, and the general level of leadership responsibility within the organization. All well and good in a steadier day. However, in the context of the Millennium

Organization, leadership becomes a fully shared phenomena which is passed around depending on the task at hand and the people involved.

Leadership under these circumstances, like leadership in the more circumscribed environment of an Open Space Event, occurs when passion is linked to responsibility and somebody, indeed anybody, moves the ball. There is no limitation on where the mantle of leadership might fall, nor can there be any. To make matters worse, any individual might simultaneously be the leader in one situation and just a member of the team in another.

With leadership shifting as it does and will, the issue of supervision becomes almost moot. A standard, stable work group over which one person has total, ongoing control will shortly become the exception. As that takes place, compensating people on the basis of the number of people they supervise will become increasingly difficult, and ultimately be seen as impossible.

Nevertheless, justice and equity require that we determine fair means of compensation based on what is actually happening, as opposed to what used to happen, or what we might wish would happen. Precisely how we are going to do all that remains to be seen and will definitely appear under the heading of *More...* in the continuing saga of the Millennium Organization.

## **The Esoteric**

At the other end of the spectrum from the everyday matter of compensation and status in the Millennium Organization there are emerging some relatively esoteric interests and concerns. At least they seem quite esoteric at the moment, but I strongly suspect that as these items assume a definitive place relative to the bottom line, they will be seen for what they are: very practical concerns. The first item is the collective consciousness.

**Collective Consciousness** Western psychology has become so fixated on the individual that useful thought about the nature of groups and organizations has often suffered. The primacy of the individual has dictated an understanding of organizational behavior as simply the aggregate of individual behaviors. Thus if one is interested in what is happening in the organization, or predicting that behavior, it is normal practice to survey the individuals, average the returns, and announce the findings. Unfortunately, the predicted behavior is often at massive variance with the actual experience. Such negative results are normally attributed to poor survey technique. I believe there is a more fundamental flaw. Groups are more than the sum of their

parts, and indeed there may be an enormous difference between the behavior of the total group and that of the individuals.

Once that difference is perceived and expected, it then becomes possible to look more closely at group capacities and behaviors. A striking discovery for me in the laboratory environment of the several Open Space Events I have been privileged to conduct, has been the operation of what I can only call the Collective Consciousness. Not to be confused with group-think, collective consciousness appears as a highly sophisticated rational process, attributable to no one individual, or small subgroup. Without meetings or even side conversations, actions are decided upon and taken. Precisely how all of this works is unclear, but I can testify that in situation after situation, effective, complex responses to serious events are manifest by the group, with no consultation or prior practice.

By way of example, consider the situation of the naked lady I reported in *Open Space Technology: A User's Guide*. On the third day of an Open Space conference on global unity, attended by a distinguished international group, a lady, desirous of "making a statement," walked to the center of the room, took off all her clothes, and sat down on the floor. The participants were, to say the least, shocked. What happened next was even more unbelievable than the originating event.



Without a word from anybody, several members of the group walked to the center of the room, and very nicely, laid an extra piece of clothing on the lady. They then sat down next to her, forming a small circle. Shortly, a lady from South Africa walked to the center and stood on one side of the small circle. Very precisely, she addressed the group: "We have come here to talk about global unity. However, we will never effectively deal with unity until we can acknowledge our diversity. And diversity, more often than not, is outrageous." A few minutes later a large man moved to the center and stood on the other side of the small circle, facing the South African Lady. His words were quite direct, "Shit happens." More time passed, and then all the remaining people moved to the center, forming a larger circle around the small one. As if on cue, though there was no cue at all, they all joined hands, sang a song, and then stood in absolute silence. Finally, without a word, the entire body of people filed from the room.

Needless to say, this event was not planned, nor was there any possibility of holding a quick committee meeting to determine what should be done. Despite that absence, the response of the group could not have been better had it been meticulously scripted. When faced with outrage, one first must bound it, then interpret, celebrate it, and let it go. Beautiful and classical, and all without a word or a planning committee.

The conventional wisdom may find the collective response evidenced in this situation to be the exception, but I find it the norm. Once on the lookout for the manifestation of the collective consciousness, it appears very regularly, and after the initial shock has worn off a host of questions arise, not the least of which are how does it work, and is it possible to leverage this power into something even more powerful. The answers have not appeared as yet, but I think the quest will be very much a part of the evolving story.

**Individuation: The Preparation of the Individual** A common experience in an Open Space Event, and a characteristic experience in the Millennium Organization is the enhancement of individuality. In spite of, or actually I think because of, the collective consciousness, the sense of individual self-worth and uniqueness is acutely heightened. It occurs to me that the process of intense dialogue, so characteristic of Open Space, is the major culprit. The growth of the individual appears to take place without any conscious effort from those involved. One wonders what the impact might be should the individuals actually have prepared themselves for the situation.

The whole issue of conscious self-preparation will come increasingly to the fore if only because sustained high-voltage operation of the sort encountered in the Millennium Organization

is difficult, and perhaps impossible, without a continuing concern with one's own psychic condition. Each person will have to work this assignment in their own way, and my approach comes out of, and indeed forms an integral part of, my daily practice of meditation. Without going into the details, which will vary for everyone, it is interesting to me that suddenly a very private practice becomes a matter of bottom-line concern. My function, and the function of an entire group, are directly related to the degree of my personal preparation at the level of Spirit.

All of this may sound strange when talking about organizations in general, and businesses in particular, but it is an open secret among world-class athletes that presence and focus, on the part of the individual and the group, constitute the essential difference between success and failure. We are learning that the same applies to organizations of all sorts, and continuing that learning will be a very important part of the growing tale.

## Epilogue

### Surfing

There are many possible images for life in the Millennium Organization, but the one which keeps returning to my mind is that of surfing. I am not an expert surfer, and I cannot even say that I have spent hours on the beach looking at those who are. So it is entirely possible that my image is highly romanticized. Be that as it may, it is my image and I am stuck with it.

Picture in your mind's eye a perfect wave, rolling in from the depths of the Pacific. Riding just below the crest is a single surfer balanced lightly on a slender surf board. The noise of the crashing surf is deafening, but there is a silence in the moment as surfer and wave move forward almost as one. The surfer-to-wave relationship is apparently one of loving respect, for it is obvious that the enormous forces bound up in that wave could crush the surfer in a millisecond, even as the sand on the fast approaching beach has been reduced to a fine powder. To ride that wave is to be closely aligned with powers of a cataclysmic sort, which nevertheless have found it possible to assume a smooth, flowing form.

Any thought that the wave might be controlled is positively ridiculous and will surely lead to wipeout or worse. The wave

rolls forward and the surfer rides only when all thought of personal control is released, to be replaced with a willingness for alignment. Curiously, as the ego is let go and union with the wave achieved, the identity of the surfer, as surfer, is not less, but infinitely more.

Thinking about what is happening is also a sure prescription for brain-strain and imminent disaster. What seems so effortless, the graceful union of board and wave, is a megamonster of complexity, changing by the nanosecond. Forces that had their genesis 2000 miles away in a passing tropical storm mate with other forces of a different genesis to give birth to new forces that roil and roll through the deep blue waters. Close to land the bottom configuration lends its influence, creating a shape and form which is always the same and never identical – pure chaos on its way to order and back again. Complexity and confusion twice confounded, and on its back the surfer rides.

And so do we all ride the waves of our common future. Marked by loving respect, our ride may be thrilling, fun, and productive. Marred by efforts at control, the ride will be short, disappointing – a disaster. The choice is ours.