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Bringing Schools Back to Life: Schools as Living Systems in *Creating Successful School Systems: Voices from the university, the field, and the community.*

We speak so easily these days of systems -- systems thinking, systems change, connectivity, networks. Yet in my experience, we really don't know what these terms mean, or their implications for our work. We don't yet know how to act or think about this new interconnected world of systems we've created. Those of us educated in Western culture learned to think and manage a world that was anything but systemic or interconnected. It was a world of separations and clear boundaries: boxes described jobs, lines charted relationships and accountabilities, roles and policies described the limits of what each individual did and who we wanted them to be. Western culture became very skilled at describing the world with these strange, unnatural separations.

We also believed that by using these approaches, we could control everything. From manipulating the weather to stopping aging and death, we have hoped that science would eventually give us complete power over life and all its processes. At the organizational level, we have striven for a similar level of control. We want to be able to make people, communities, and entire organizations act according to our plans and directives. We want strong, take-charge leaders who know exactly what's going on, have all the answers, and who inspire us with their vision. If only we could find such a leader, we say that we would do whatever we were told.

By now, most of us have been in organizations and lives that have revealed to us the foolishness of these assumptions. No matter how well we plan, how carefully we analyze a situation, or how strong a leader we find, we don't succeed nearly as often as we need to. We put more and more effort into planning and leadership approaches that seem only to lead us farther and farther away from our goals and aspirations. We have suffered from the unending fads that, like great tidal waves, crash down on our schools, creating more destruction than growth. As the most recent wave recedes, we look over our organizations and see debris scattered everywhere--relationships torn apart, survivors struggling to come up for air, ideas and plans tossed askew.

In corporations, fads have failed in exactly the same manner, creating great wreckage. Corporations are no better than any other sector at knowing how to create needed changes, even though we still look to them for the next new idea. It's usually shocking for those in education to realize that not only schools are failing miserably, but so is every major institutional form, whether public or private, for profit or for public benefit. In recent years, many

corporate CEOs have reported that up to 75% of their major change initiatives failed to create the results promised. This is a startling record of failures-how many of us in education would garner support for a project or curriculum that was successful only 25% of the time?

I. We need to shift our worldview

So what are we to do? Is there any source that can teach us how to create change in these large and complex systems we've created? Many years ago, Joel Barker popularized the notion of paradigms or worldviews, those beliefs and assumptions through which we see the world and explain how it works. He stated that when something is impossible to achieve with one paradigm or worldview, it can be surprisingly easy to accomplish with a new worldview. In my own work, I have found this to be delightfully true. For several years, my partner, Myron Kellner-Rogers and I have been looking at organizations through the lens of living systems, rather than the traditional one of organizations as machines. Machine thinking has been the dominant paradigm of western culture and science for over three hundred years. Almost all approaches to management and organizational change have used mechanistic images. We build organizations piece by piece, engineering them for efficiency, detailing ahead of time who will do what and how the organization will respond. We believe in simple cause and effect, and that it is possible to fix any problem by identifying the faulty part (or person). As soon as we replace that one errant part, everything will work fine.

But this 21st century world of complexity and turbulence is no place for the mechanistic thinking of the past. We are confronted daily by events and outcomes that surprise us. Nothing moves slowly enough for us to make sense of the world using any analytic process we were taught. And the complexity of modern systems cannot be understood by separating issues into neat boxes and diagrams. In a complex system, it is impossible to find simple causes that explain our problems, or to know who to blame. A messy tangle of relationships has given rise to these unending crises. We need a different worldview to guide us in this new world of continuous change and intimately connected systems that reach around the globe.

Fortunately, we live inside a daily demonstration of the capacity of complex systems to change, flex, and grow in effectiveness. For four to five billion years, life has been developing its infinite variety. Life continues to startle scientists with its diversity and resiliency, showing up in the coldest and hottest habitats, places where science thought no life could ever exist. Myron's and my work has benefited immensely from studying the processes by which living systems form, adapt, and sustain themselves. We have found life to be a rich source of ideas and wisdom for how we humans can approach the challenge of creating schools or any complex system that has the capacity to grow and change yet remain purposeful and effective over time.

In life, systems are a naturally occurring phenomenon. All life organizes into networks, not neat boxes or hierarchies. Wherever you look in the natural world, you find only networks, not org charts. These networks are always incredibly messy, dense, tangled, and extraordinarily effective at creating greater sustainability for all who participate in them. All living systems are webs of relations spun into existence as individuals realize that there is more benefit available to them if they create relationships than if they stay locked in narrow boundaries of self-interest. Unending processes of collaboration and symbiosis characterize life. These relationships of mutual benefit lead to the creation of systems that are more supportive and

protective of individuals than if they had tried to live alone. It's important to remember that nothing living lives alone. Life always and only organizes as systems of interdependency.

Until the advent of western ideas originating in the 17th century, almost all human thought and spiritual traditions had described life in terms of interdependency and connectedness. But the machine imagery that has grown in strength for three hundred years has succeeded in creating modern society with an entirely different imagery. Dense webs of connections have been replaced with pre-designed organization charts that neatly detail who should be connected to whom. And we quickly forgot that life knows how to organize itself, that organization also is a naturally occurring phenomenon. We stopped seeing life's great capacity for self-organization and came to believe that if we didn't do the organizing, then nothing would get done. Without us, there would be disastrous chaos. In western culture, we gradually came to believe that without our efforts, everything would fall apart, and we lost sight of the many processes by which life gives birth to order. In our blindness, we developed processes that failed to work with life, and as a result, we have been unsuccessful in learning how to work well in this changing and evolving universe. It's ironic to notice how our many attempts to impose order have created just the opposite effect, more disorder. And our continuing failures at trying to change people and organizations are teaching us that our mechanistic approaches are truly flawed.

It is time to wake up to the fact that we live in an interconnected world, embedded in a fabric of relationships that requires us to pay attention to the dynamics of systems, not isolated individuals, buildings, or events. As we try now to leave behind our rusting machine-image concepts of organization, it is a relief to notice that we are surrounded by great teachers-not management experts or texts or fads-but life itself, the natural world which is adept at change, unfathomably complex, and filled with systems that support increasing diversity.

I'd like to share a few of the change principles evident in living systems, and then describe ways to use these in organizational change efforts.

II. How life self-organizes and changes

A living system forms itself as it recognizes shared interests.

Although systems are naturally occurring, they do not form at random. A living system forms itself as it recognizes shared interests. A system is created when individuals realize they have neighbors, and that they would do better to figure out how to live together than to try and destroy each another. Thus, systems form through collaboration, from a realization that you need another in order to maintain your life. If you think you can make it on your own, or that you don't need your neighbor, why would you bother to struggle to find ways that are mutually supportive? The recognition that individuals need each other lies at the heart of every system. From that realization, individuals reach out, and seemingly divergent self-interests develop into a system of interdependency.

At the human level, with our great need for relationships and meaningful lives, systems are similarly created. We seek to connect with and work with those whose self-interest seems to include our self-interest. We affiliate with those who share a similar sense of what is important. When you apply this dynamic to public education, it instantly reveals a major dilemma. Is a

school system really a system? Systems are never just a result of geography, and it isn't district lines drawn on paper that creates a school system. Systems arise, they take form because people choose to affiliate together, because they realize that in order to get what is important to them, they must extend themselves and work with others.

But in public education, how many members of a geographically-determined school district share a core of beliefs about the purposes of education? Most districts contain a wide spectrum of beliefs about the role of education. There are those who believe that education should support the talented elite, which includes their child. Those who view education as the foundation of a pluralistic society where education should open doors for all. Those who believe in a rich life of the mind. Those who want their children taught only the values of their parents or church.

The startling conclusion is that most school systems aren't systems. They are only boundary lines drawn by somebody, somewhere. They are not systems because they do not arise from a core of shared beliefs about the purpose of public education. In the absence of shared beliefs and desires, people are not motivated to seek out one another and develop relationships. Instead, they co-inhabit the same organizational and community space without weaving together mutually sustaining relationships. They co-exist by defining clear boundaries, creating respectful and disrespectful distances, developing self-protective behaviors, and using power politics to get what they want.

Yet everyone who participates in a school district is a living being, responding to the same dynamics that characterize all other life. Within the artificial boundary lines and well-defended territories, people are self-organizing into real systems, reaching out to network with those who share similar beliefs or aspirations. (This dynamic is clearly evident in the Charter school movement.) Many small systems are created within the artificial system of a district. It is these real systems that become instantly visible when we try to change the artificial one. They often startle us with the ferocity by which they confront and impede our efforts. But it is these real systems we must work with, and the dynamics that give them birth, if we want to affect change.

For change to occur, there must be a change in meaning.

People, like all life, only change when they allow an event or information to disturb them into voluntarily letting go of their present beliefs and developing a new interpretation. Nothing living changes until it interprets things differently. Change occurs when we let go of our certainty-our beliefs and assumptions-and willingly create a new understanding of what's going on.

Here's what the process of change looks like in a living system. (As you read this, you might compare and contrast it to the organizational change processes you've experienced.) Someone in the system notices something (the system is defined by shared meaning, not size, so for human systems it could be a team of two, a school, a community, an ethnic group within a nation state.) What they notice might be in a memo, a chance comment, a news report. The source doesn't matter; what is important is that a member of the system chooses to be disturbed. "Chooses" is the important word here because the freedom to be disturbed belongs to the individual. If that individual freely chooses to take notice, he/she brings the information into their system and circulates it through its networks.

Once inside these dense webs of relationships, an initially small disturbance circulates rapidly and grows as it is passed back and forth. As different parts of the system hear of it, interpret it, and change it, the disturbance grows and mutates. It becomes quite distorted from the original information, but as it circulates, it develops greater meaning. If it keeps travelling in the network, it finally becomes so important that it cannot be ignored. The whole system now sits up and takes notice. We've all had this experience, probably many times. A casual or offhanded comment tossed out in a meeting gets picked up by someone in the organization, and suddenly we're in the midst of a firestorm of opinions, emotions, and rumors. Or something distressing happens in a school that is so disturbing that everyone wakes up to the realization that things are not as they seemed.

At this point, when the disturbance has swelled to great intensity, change is at hand. The system has been knocked completely off-balance; it can't make sense of the disturbance by relying on past practice or beliefs. This point of disequilibrium is the point when change is finally possible. The system can no longer avoid the need to let go of its current beliefs, structures, patterns, values. It must abandon the meaning it used to construct its world. It plunges into a state of confusion and uncertainty, of chaos, (a state that always feels terrible.) But because it falls apart, the system now is capable of reorganizing itself into a new mode of being. It is changing because it understands the world differently. It reorganizes itself from new interpretations, new meaning. It re-creates itself from new understandings of what's important. For change to occur, there must be a change in meaning.

Every living system is free to choose whether it will change or not.

It is impossible to coerce a living system to change in any direction but the one it chooses for itself. We never succeed in directing or telling people how they must change. We can't succeed by handing them a plan, or pestering them with our interpretations, or relentlessly pressing forward with our agenda, believing that volume and intensity will convince them to see it our way. One of the essential and elemental characteristics of all life is freedom, the freedom to see the world and interpret things as the individual chooses. It doesn't matter whether it's bacteria or humans, the freedom to self-determine is intrinsic to all life. You can't boss life around, no matter how small it is. You can scream and holler as much as you want, but if it doesn't regard what you're saying as important, the organism will just ignore you and go on with its own life. (In this way, all life behaves like teen-agers.) All change is voluntary, both in direction and timing. It is always initiated by the individual by its own choice.

We always exercise this freedom on behalf of our selves. We choose what to notice and how to respond based on what we think will help us. We are striving all the time to maintain and preserve our identity, who we are, who we want to be. This process is called self-reference—we interpret the world through who we are. Although much of our behavior is habitual and unconscious, these patterns of behavior always originate from a belief that by doing this, or not doing that, we will best support ourselves. We choose to do what we do because we believe it is the best way to maintain the self that we think we are.

Everything alive interprets its world through its self, and must be free to determine its own responses. It is impossible to impose anything on life. Every living being must participate in anything that affects it. We can't act on behalf of any individual or group of people. Nobody can figure out what's best for somebody else. If leaders or task forces refuse to believe this, and go

ahead and make plans for us, we don't ever just sit by passively and do what we're told. We still get involved. But we then act from the sidelines, from wherever we've been told to sit and wait. We exercise our need for involvement through ignoring, resisting, or sabotaging all plans and directives that are imposed on us.

One school superintendent reported wryly how he learned that his committee approach to curriculum development wasn't working. Every summer, he would appoint a group of four or five teachers from each discipline to develop materials for the coming year. He was pleased with their products and often commented on their creativity. Sometime during the late autumn, as the superintendent made site visits, he would ask teachers how they liked the new materials. It took him too many years, he said, to realize that the only teachers using the materials were those members of the committee that had created them.

This is not an unusual experience for any of us. How many strategic plans, policy manuals, and curricula materials collect dust on our shelves because we were not involved in their creation? Confronted by so much evidence, we could have learned long ago what life always teaches us: People only support what they create. We must always participate in the development of those things which affect us.

To create a healthier system, connect it to more of itself.

Living systems contain their own solutions. When they are suffering in any way—from divisive relationships, from lack of information, from declining performance—the solution is always to bring the system together so that it can learn more about itself from itself. Somewhere in the system there are people who have already figured out how to resolve this problem. They are already practicing what others think is impossible. Or they possess information which, if known more widely, would help many others. Or as a particular group that has been negatively labeled or stereotyped, they are far more capable than anyone knows.

To make a system healthier, we need simply to connect it to more of itself. This means meeting together with those we have excluded or avoided, those we never dreamed were part of our system of shared interest. Most often, people deep inside a school building don't realize how many others—parents, community employers, public officials—feel connected to them. When those who have been excluded to the periphery get to meet with those inside the system, it is always a wonderful surprise to everyone to see how much they share in common and how many of them want the same thing.

It is crucial to remember that, in organizations, we are working with webs of relations, not with machines. Once we recognize organizations as webs, there is a lot to be learned about organizational change from contemplating spider webs. Most of us have had the experience of touching a spider web, feeling its resiliency, noticing how slight pressure in one area jiggles the entire web. If a web breaks and needs repair, the spider doesn't cut out a piece, terminate it, or tear the entire web apart and reorganize it. She reweaves it, using the silken relationships that are already there, creating stronger connections across the weakened spaces.

At this time in our history, we are in great need of processes that can help us weave ourselves back together. We've lost confidence in our great human capabilities, partly because we've been using organizational processes that have treated us as machines. We've ended up

separated and divided, fearful and distrusting of one another. We need processes to help us reweave connections, to discover shared interests, to listen to one another's stories and dreams. We need processes that take advantage of our natural ability to network, to communicate when something is meaningful to us. We need processes that invite us to participate, that honor our creativity and commitment to the organization.

Principles for how life self-organizes and changes

- A living system forms itself as it recognizes shared interests
- For change to occur, there must be a change in meaning
- Every living system is free to choose whether it will change or not
- To create a healthier system, connect it to more of itself

II. Working with life's capacity to change

If our intent is to help a school system move forward and create change for itself, we need to take these four principles very seriously. We have exhausted ourselves and our resources trying to force schools and people to change. (And this is true of all other institutions as well.) I'd like to describe how using these principles can dramatically change our approach to organizational change.

The first work is to discover what's meaningful

I've come to believe that both individual and organizational change start from the same need, the need to discover what's meaningful to them. People will change only if they believe that a new insight, a new idea, or a new form is important to them. If it is a school system or community interested in changing, this search for new meaning must be a collective activity to discover whether a community of shared interests actually exists.

To put this into practice has required significant changes on my part. Now, my first work with a group is to learn who they are, what they find meaningful. I can never learn this by listening to self-reports, or taking the word of a few people. I discover what's meaningful to them by noticing what issues and behaviors get their attention. What topics generate the most energy, positive or negative? I have to be curious to discover these answers, constantly letting go of my assumptions and stereotypes. And I have to be working with them, not sitting on the side observing behavior or interviewing individuals. If we're together in the process of doing actual work, the true identity of the group always becomes visible, and I know that it's the real thing, not a fantasy image.

In identifying meaningful issues, I assume that even in the presence of a group or collective identity, I will discover multiple and divergent interpretations for everything that occurs. I try to put ideas, proposals, and issues on the table as experiments to see what's meaningful to people rather than as recommendations for what should be meaningful. I try to stay open to the different reactions I get, rather than instantly categorizing people as resisters or allies (although this is not always easy). I listen actively for diversity rather than agreement, and gradually, I'm even learning to welcome it. It has been fascinating to notice how many interpretations the different members of a group can give to the same event. I am both

astonished and confident that, as new science teaches, no two people see the world exactly the same.

Discovering one another as colleagues

However it gets done, discovering what is meaningful to a person, group, or organization is the first essential work. We discover this by working together, thinking together, conversing together-with curiosity, patience, and the expectation of diverse stories. But through this process of exploring diverse interpretations, we oftentimes discover a unifying center or energy that makes the work of change possible. We begin to recognize that there is a sufficient amount of shared interests that we could be a system.

Discovering shared interests always changes people's relationships for the better. If we recognize a shared sense of injustice or a shared dream, magical things happen to our relationships; we open to each other as colleagues. Past hurts and negative histories get left behind. People step forward to work together. We don't hang back, we don't withdraw, we don't wait to be enticed. We seek each other out, eager to discover others who might help. The call of meaning, the importance of the problem, sounds louder than past grievances or our fears that we don't know how to have an impact. If we can discover something important to work on together, we figure out how to do the work, together.

I've been humbled to see how a group comes together as it recognizes its mutual interests. Working together becomes possible because they have discovered a shared meaning for the project that is strong enough to embrace them all. Held together in this rich center of meaning, people let go of many interpersonal difficulties, and work around traditional hindrances. They become a true system-they know they need each other. They are willing to struggle with relationships and figure out how to make them work because they realize this is the only path to achieving their aspirations.

I've worked with a number of faculties torn apart by the impact of technology. The more technologically eager faculty accuse the reticent ones of being out of date and resistant to change-they berate their colleagues for not climbing on the technology bandwagon. I always suggest that a different conversation is needed. What if we stop assuming that technology's value to a teacher is self-evident? What if we stop assuming that anybody who doesn't adopt new technology is an antiquated Luddite whose only interest is to stop the march of progress? If we give up those assumptions, we can begin a different conversation, one that helps us connect to one another and learn more about what we each find meaningful in our profession. We need to step back from the technology issue and ask one another what called us into teaching. We listen to the aspirations that are voiced. And what we always hear is that most of us went into teaching for noble purposes-we wanted to make a difference in the lives of young people, we were excited to help kids learn.

If we have this conversation first, we discover one another as colleagues. We realize we want very similar things. We realize that the person we had judged as dead-on-the-job still carries a passion for learning. Or that the teacher who belittles students still cares about them. Now we can talk about technology. How might computers assist colleagues to become more effective at their craft? How might technology make it easier to do the work they have defined as meaningful? If those links are made, then colleagues log-on to email, and use the computers

sitting on their desks to enhance student learning. And if they don't, we still know them now as colleagues, not problems.

This process of inquiring together about the meaning of our work also helps us stop the labeling behavior that is far too prevalent these days. We are quick to assign people to a typology and then dismiss them, as if we really knew who they were. As we frantically try to implement changes we know are crucial to our organization's survival, we tend to hunt for scapegoats. We notice only those who impede our good plans--all those "resistors," those stubborn and scared colleagues who cling to the past. (We label ourselves also, but more generously, as "early adopters" or "cultural creatives.")

I was recently given a T-shirt with a wonderful motto printed on the back: "You can't hate someone whose story you know." But these days, in our crazed haste, we don't have time to be curious about who a person is, or why they're behaving as they do. Listening to colleagues describe the meaning they ascribe to their work is always transformative, and often moves them out of our "enemy" category. We move past the labels and notice another human being who wants to make some small contribution to something we care about. We discard the divisive categories and want to work together. How else but through our joining can we create the change we both want to see in the world?

Living networks are great communicators

I have also learned to appreciate the incredible communicating power of living networks when information is meaningful to them. Meaningful information lights up a network, and moves through it like a windswept brush fire. Meaningless information, in contrast, smolders at the gates until somebody dumps cold water on it. The capacity of a network to communicate with itself is truly awe inspiring; its transmission capability far surpasses any other mode of communication. But a living network will only transmit what it decides is meaningful. I have watched information move instantaneously across great distances in a global company; I have watched information in four color graphics die before it ever came off the printer. To use a network's communication capacity, we must notice that its transmission power is directly linked to the meaningfulness of the information.

Meaning behaves like energy. It doesn't behave in mechanistic ways. Therefore, we can abandon many of our mechanistic assumptions about what is required for organizational change. We don't have to achieve "critical mass", we don't need programs that "roll-out" (or over) the entire organization, we don't need to train every individual or part, we can stop obsessing if we don't get the support of the top of the organization. Instead, we can work locally, finding the meaning-rich ideas and processes that create energy in one area of the system. If we succeed in generating energy in one area, then we can watch how our other networks choose to notice what we're doing. Who lights up and takes notice? Where have our ideas traveled to in the organizational web? If we ask these questions, we learn who might be ready to take up this work next. Myron describes his approach to organizational change as: "Start anywhere and follow it everywhere."

Everybody must be involved

During the past several years, I've often learned the hard way that participation is not an option. As organizational change facilitators and leaders, we have no choice but to figure out how to invite in everybody who is going to be affected by this change. Those that we fail to invite into the creation process will surely and always show up as resistors and saboteurs. But I haven't become insistent on broad-based participation just as a means to avoid resistance, or to get people on board as supporters of the change effort. I've learned that we can't design anything that works if we don't have the whole system involved in its creation. None of us is smart enough these days to know what will work inside these dense networks we call organizations. It's impossible to know what's going on inside any system. We can't see what's meaningful to people, or even understand how they get their work done.

I know from experience that most people are very smart—they have figured out how to make things work when it seemed impossible, they have invented ways to get around roadblocks and dumb policies, they have created their own networks to support them and help them learn. But rarely is this visible to the organization until and unless people are brought into problem-solving and organizational change processes and invited to contribute what they know. The complexity and density of systems require that we engage the whole system just so we can harvest the invisible intelligence that exists throughout the organization.

Fortunately, during the past ten years there has been a great deal of pioneering work on how to engage whole systems in changing themselves. There is now quite a lot of evidence for how well these processes work. What still seems to be lacking is our commitment to involving everybody. We keep hoping we don't need to—that if we design a good plan, people will accept it because of its merits. We haven't yet absorbed the simple truth that every living being, every colleague, maintains the right to determine whether he/she will change. We can't force anybody to change. We can only involve them in the change process from the beginning, and see what's possible. If change becomes meaningful to them, they will change. If we want their support, we must welcome them as co-creators. People only support what they create.

Learning to work with living systems

Shifting our approaches to organizational change, so that we are working with life's change dynamics, is a gradual process that requires high degrees of watchfulness, patience and generosity. No one is able to act in new ways just because they want to. Everyone gets yanked back to old ways of doing things, especially when we feel tense or confused. In our own work, Myron and I have found that we need first to work with a group to define their design principles. These are always some variation of the four principles presented in this article. We've also learned that the group needs to keep alert to their process, their learnings, and how the change effort is unfolding and emerging. To do this, we develop questions that everyone commits to asking regularly, and with discipline. Here are some examples of the questions we use, but it's more important to create your own, and then hold yourself responsible as a group to the discipline of asking them frequently. Such questions allow you to notice those things that are critical to your success.

- 1. Who else needs to be here to do this work?**
- 2. Why are we doing this? Is the meaning still clear?**
- 3. How is the meaning changing?**
- 4. Are we becoming better truth-tellers with each other?**

5. Is information becoming more open and easier to access?
6. Are we trying to impose anything?
7. Are we becoming more alert to what's going on, right now?
8. Are we learning to partner with confusion and chaos as opportunities for real change?

Learning to trust life's self-ordering process

I have to admit that the greatest challenge for me and those I work with lies not in adopting new methods, but in learning to live in this process world. It's a completely new way to be, unlike anything I was taught. I'm learning to participate with things as they unfold, to expect to be surprised, to enjoy the mystery of it, and to surrender to how much I don't know and can never know. These were difficult lessons to learn. I was well-trained to create things-plans, events, measures, programs. I invested more than half my life in trying to make the world conform to what I thought was best. It hasn't been easy to give up the role of master creator and move into the dance of life.

But I've gradually learned there is no alternative. As our dance partner, life insists that we put ourselves in motion, that we learn to live with instability, chaos, change, and surprise. We can continue to stand immobilized on the shoreline, trying to protect ourselves from life's insistent storms, or we can begin moving. We can watch our plans be washed away, or we can discover something new.

Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of the martial art of Aikido, was a small man who could turn back the onslaughts of opponents many times his weight and size with movements that were imperceptible. He appeared to be perfectly centered, anchored to the ground in an extraordinary way. But this was not the case. His ability came not from superior balance, but from superb levels of self-awareness. As he described it, he was quicker to notice when he was off-balance, and faster at returning to center.

He perfectly describes how to work in harmony with life rather than to resist it. First, we must know what "center" feels like. As individuals and as organizations, we must know who we are, our patterns of behavior, our values, our intentions. The ground of our identity and experience must feel familiar to us; we must know what it feels like to stand in it. But we don't expect that we will be perfectly balanced at that center point all the time. We know that we will drift into the wrong activities or be thrown off-balance by life's chaos. But we also will know when we've moved off too far, and be able to recall ourselves more quickly to who we want to be.

The second quality that Sensei Ueshiba highlights is a quality of attention that keeps us participating in the moment. The changing nature of life insists that we give more attention to what is occurring right in front of us, right now. We can't hide behind our plans or measures. We need to become curious about what's really going on, what just happened. The present moment overflows with information about ourselves and our environment. But so many of those learnings fly by unobserved because we're preoccupied with our images of how we want the world to be.

Being present in the moment doesn't mean that we act without intention or flow directionless through life without any plans. But in an unpredictable world, we would do better to look at

plans and measures as processes that enable a group to discover shared interests, to clarify its intent and strengthen its connections to new people and new information. *We need less reverence for the plan as an object, and much more attention to the processes we use for planning and measuring.* It is attention to the process, more than the product, that enables us to weave an organization as flexible and resilient as a spider's web.

As we learn to live and work in this process world, we are rewarded with other changes in our behavior. I see that we become gentler people. We become more curious about differences, more respectful of one another, more open to life's surprises. It's not that we're either more hopeful or pessimistic, but we are more patient and accepting. I like to believe we become this way because we're willing to work with life on its terms. Although life's dance looked frantic from the outside, difficult to learn and impossible to master, our newfound gentleness speaks to a different learning. Life is a good partner. Its demands are not unreasonable. A great capacity for change lives in everyone of us.



ABOUT MARGARET (MEG) WHEATLEY, Ed.D.

Margaret Wheatley writes, speaks, and teaches how we can accomplish our work, sustain our relationships, and willingly step forward to serve in this troubled time. She is co-founder and President emerita of The Berkana Institute, an organizational consultant since 1973, a global citizen since her youth, and a prolific writer. She has authored eight books. Her numerous articles may be downloaded free at her web site: margaretwheatley.com. For more biographical information, see margaretwheatley.com/bio