

**FUTURE SEARCH:
SEEKING A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

An Essay

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*"Does it bother anybody else around here, besides me,
that what doctors do they call 'a practice?'"*

Stephen Wright

In the spring of 1999 I was involved in two Future Search Conferences. The first was in Holman, an Inuit community of 500 people located on Victoria Island in the Arctic Ocean, about 300 miles north of the Arctic Circle. The second, a month or so later, took place in Fort Good Hope, an aboriginal community of 800 people on the MacKenzie River, straddling the Arctic Circle, about 100 miles west of Great Bear Lake. Both Searches had common objectives.

They were designed to help each community develop a vision for its future and an action plan for achieving the vision. There were about 70 participants in each conference, almost all participants were aboriginal, and both conferences had a significant number of youth and elders.

They were similar in another way. The Future Search process seemed to help people reach down into the core of their existence to explore their culture, their spirituality, their aboriginal languages, their relationship with the land, and their relationship with one another. It wasn't all sweetness and light, for participants were also confronting the problems of addictions, the suicide of their young people, and the conflicts within families. As I watched all of this happening, I found myself asking the same questions I'm asking more and more with each Future Search. What's going on here? Why are these things happening? How are they happening--what's triggering them?

In the summer of 1998 I went to Philadelphia to visit Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff, the creators of the Future Search process. I asked them what actually happened during a Future Search Conference. Marvin responded, "Something is happening in these Future Searches and we are not sure what it is." By that, I'm sure he meant that things were beginning to emerge from the Future Search experience--on this continent and in other parts of the world--that can't be explained by the process itself.

(An aside. I've had the same kinds of questions about Open Space Conferences. They, too, in some mysterious manner work as catalysts to generate and manifest the inner realities of organizations and communities. I think there is a natural affinity between the Future Search process and the Open Space process. It is no accident that many of us use both processes.)

So what is this inner reality of communities and organizations that Future Search process seems to be able to tap into? Can we develop a conceptual framework that can help us understand how we can best work with communities and organizations?

Some friends tell me not to worry about "conceptual frameworks." The whole thing is intuitive," they say. "Don't try to analyze it; just go with the flow." Maybe they're right. Maybe there is no conceptual framework. I have my own doubts at times and I often reflect on the warning

contained in the old Buddhist Proverb: "The Tao we can define is not the real Tao." Maybe it is all intuitive.

But then my left brain kicks in, and I remember Stephen Wright's wry comment about doctors and their practice. We trust doctors not because of what they can do (their practice or techniques) but because of what they know. Their knowledge is based upon a conceptual framework that has developed over hundreds of years. And this conceptual framework has everything to do with an understanding of the human body and much less to do with an understanding of techniques.

So do we have an equivalent, commonly shared conceptual framework for corporate or social bodies? If so, what are its basic concepts, assumptions, theories, and principles?

Answer: I don't think we have a conceptual framework, at least not a common one that we share as a group of practitioners. We're "winging it." What we do have is a continual on-going discussion about the Future Search process. We have become very much concerned about the how--the techniques. But we seem to have neglected the "what."

We need to shift the emphasis and ratchet the discussion up a few levels.

We've all heard the expression attributed to Einstein that we can't find answers to problems in the same place we experience the problems. Over-used but true--especially in regard to community and organizational development. We have to step outside our profession and seek answers elsewhere.

Where shall we look? I think we have to look to the universe in which we exist.

***"The problem with most people seeking common ground
is they don't realize that they are standing on it."***

Brendan Keevey

My friend Brendan Keevey made this comment one day when I was visiting him at his home in Trenton, New Jersey. We were talking about religion and I was bemoaning the inability of the Ecumenical Movement to help the various denominations and religions discover some common ground. Brendan agreed, pointed at the ground and went on to say, "I think that the only possible common ground for the churches is the common ground of the earth on which they are all standing. All religions share the same earth, and it is that earth that shapes their understanding of the divine and the holy."

I've come to believe that what Brendan said about churches and religions is just as true for communities and organizations.

In recent years, thanks to the work of physicists, earth scientists and systems thinkers, we have come to realize that our planet, far from being some inanimate object on which people live, is a

living reality itself. Further, as we ponder the significance of this fact, we come to realize that everything in the universe--including our organizations and communities--share in this existence. It is this reality--***communities and organizations as living organisms, part of a living universe***--that is becoming the central tenet of much of today's thinking about how we live together and organize ourselves.

But getting our mind around this concept won't be easy. Making the changes in our personal and professional lives will be even more difficult. We have been conditioned to think of communities as places on maps, and organizations as collections of people and inanimate resources locked inside inanimate legal structures. The *New Science* is suggesting that we think of organizations and communities as "life-forms" expressed through relationships and, like all living realities, having consciousness, the capacity to process information, and to some extent at least, the ability to self-organize and self-regulate. For many of us, these concepts are quite new.

They require us to learn new ways of working with organizations. Since the Industrial Revolution, we have been imprinted with the idea that organizations lack any inherent order or life, other than what people within them can provide. We have been taught that the organizational environment is, by its very nature, a chaotic environment with an inherent tendency towards entropy and self-destruction. The role of leaders and managers is to not let that happen. They must bring "order out of chaos" by ensuring that things do not get "out of control." Most of us consultants have followed suit in adopting this control paradigm. We have been conditioned to serve our clients. And if our clients see their job as control--getting a better handle on their people and resources--then our role is to help them find better ways of exercising control.

The control paradigm has dominated management science for almost 100 years. As Margaret Wheatley has noted, our preoccupation with controls has presented serious problems. We have consistently confused an organization's need for order with our concepts of control. (*Leadership and The New Science*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco p.22). Fortunately, there are a few hardy souls--Margaret Wheatley, Myron Kellner-Rogers, and Ralph Stacey come immediately to mind--who are creating a bridge between the insights of modern science and organizational theory. They are helping us explore the reality of organizations and communities as "life-forms."

The idea that somehow our communities and organizations are intimately linked to a living universe is, for many of us, an even greater reach. As individuals we recognize that our survival is dependent upon the maintenance of the planet's life systems--the land, the waters, the air, the food chain. But we seem to have much greater difficulty recognizing the same kind of relationship between our organizations and the earth.

We don't seem to notice (or we choose to ignore the fact) that our local and national economies are completely dependant upon the earth's economy, or that our corporate use of resources is dependant upon the carrying capacity of the land to renew itself. Aboriginal peoples have always understood this relationship of individuals, organizations and communities with the

universe. Their traditional definition of community expresses this relationship in a simple yet profound manner. A community is *an intimate relationship with all living things, both animate and inanimate*.

***"I don't know who it was that first discovered water,
but I'm sure it wasn't a fish"***
Marshall McLuhan

Once we accept the concept that organizations are living systems, part of a rapidly expanding and living universe, we run into a problem in terms of organizational thinking. Our organizational models and personal role models are outdated. To become relevant once again, we must be able to "think outside the box".

But this is no easy task. Like Marshall McLuhan's fish, most of us move around in an environment we have always known and we never question it. The world that we know and are used to becomes the real world. In some cases, when things really deteriorate, we lose contact with "the outside". We, and the organizations we work with, become autistic; we construct our own world that conforms to our distorted view of what is real. When this happens, our survival depends upon our ability to break free from our frames and discover insights in other disciplines that we can then bring back to our work.

Ralph Copleman did this in a recent issue of *FutureSearching (Spring, 1999)*. He turned to the work of Thomas Berry, a cosmologist and "geologian" and linked the insights of Berry to the realities of the Future Search process.

According to Berry, there are three intrinsic principles inherent in the nature of the universe: interiority, diversity and communion.

Interiority (or subjectivity) is the recognition that the universe is a living organism, conscious and aware. Its primary manifestation of its consciousness is its ability to self-organize. Scientists call this *autopoiesis*--from the Greek meaning "self-making".

Diversity is the inherent tendency of the universe to differentiate among species and to create new species. Nature hates uniformity. Thus, there is more than one kind of fish in the sea, there is more than one kind of bird in the sky and there are a diversity of personalities and viewpoints in a Future Search Conference.

Communion is the inherent tendency of the universe to hold things together in a dynamic balance while acknowledging their interiority and diversity.

And here comes the hook...

If organizations really are living organisms and part of a living universe, then organizations must manifest these same tendencies. We find within organizations a living energy force that manifests itself in interiority, diversity and communion. It is not a question of the Future Search group animator (a term I prefer to "group facilitator") putting this energy into the organization. It is already "in there"--though not always readily apparent. In dying organizations there may only be reflex actions--involuntary quiverings of a brain-dead organism--not to put too fine a point on it.

The task of the group animator, then, is to "discern the Spirit" within the community or organization.

For me, Harrison Owen has come closer to verbalizing this reality than anyone else. He says that the role of the group animator is to "channel Spirit." She does this by "holding the space"--being a presence that provides a group-conscious sense of place where whatever is going to happen will happen. This does not mean that the animator does not make interventions. She does. But she tries to do so in a manner that is consistent with the life-energy force or Spirit within the organization--which often manifests itself in interiority, diversity and communion. She is particularly careful about imposing her own ideas on the organization lest they conflict with the organization's own consciousness of itself.

*"We are not human beings on a spiritual journey';
we're spiritual beings on a human journey."*

Teilhard de Chardin

So what does the group animator actually do when working with the living organisms we call organizations?

Since almost all of our animation role models come out of the old control paradigm, we need to find new ones. I've been searching around for new models-- models that will better explain the spiritual role of the animator as she works with living organizations and communities. I've come up with two of them. Some of my more traditional consulting friends up here in the Arctic think they are very "woo-woo". But they work for me.

I think of the group animator as an energy healer. She is something like a practitioner of Reiki, therapeutic touch, acupuncture, and/or like a body-work practitioner. These healers posit the presence of an energy force in the human body with its own healing powers. They try to stimulate, recharge, realign, and rebalance this energy force, bringing wholeness to the body's systems. They do not do the healing. Rather--as some practitioners note--they use their own consciousness to channel and link the healing energy force of the universe with the receiver's own energy field. To make the application to organizations, much of this is done by re-establishing relationships (with colleagues, clients, customers, etc). To use a parallel analogy for a moment, I often think of the group animator as a dowser who divines relationships to help nourish, heal and repair the life-Spirit of an organization.

The second role model is that of the shaman--a role model that is quite familiar to many of the people I work with here in the Arctic. The role of the shaman predates the Old Testament prophets by thousands of years and is nearly as old as human consciousness. The shaman is a gifted person, a seer, who to quote David Abrams, "(has) the ability to slip out of the perceptual boundaries that demarcate his or her particular culture...in order to make contact with, and learn from, the other powers in the land." The shaman then brings back these learning experiences to benefit the community. ("The Spell of the Sensuous," Panteon Books, 1996 p 9).

I think the group animator, like the shaman, goes on shamanic journeys. Sometimes she travels inside the group through her powers of observation, her sensitivity, her imagination, the responsive echoes she hears within her own Spirit and spirituality. Sometimes she travels outside the group through her research, her networking, perhaps even through her use of the technology like the Internet--to visit "strange new worlds," to seek, learn and understand. She then brings back to her clients new understanding and knowledge. It is this experiencing of new worlds, gathering new insights, exploring new realities, breaking out of the narrow intellectual constraints of one's clients and the bringing back of these experiences that is an essential part of the group animator's role. For these "shamanic journeys" can bring back with them a sense of hope and healing. Mircea Eliade tells us that in many cultures the shaman is primarily a spiritual healer. "The shaman is seen as having special powers to see and find the soul that has escaped and recapture it for the benefit of the patient." (Shamanism: *Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, Princeton University Press, 1964.p 300)

An interesting note. One of the characteristic features of the shaman's costume--especially in China and Siberia-- is the use of copper mirrors. These are hung around the neck or pinned to the sleeves. They are a symbol of the shaman's ability to see into different worlds. But, symbolically, they also enable the shaman's clients to look into the mirror and see reflections of their own Spirit and needs.

The factor that is common to the energy healer, to the shaman and to the group animator is the spiritual nature of their respective tasks. All three roles require sensitivity, awareness, and consciousness of energy, movement, and change. All three roles seek out life energies and help individuals and groups discover within themselves the sources of their own healing. All three roles are based upon a world view that links the work with individuals and groups to the life of the universe itself. And all three roles require internal discipline, commitment, continued learning, and an awareness of one's own Spirit. Most of all they require an ability to recognize and understand the *really* "big picture"--the influence of a living universe that surrounds the organization or community.

For me, the ability to see this "big picture" has best been expressed by the Jesuit paleontologist, Teilhard de Chardin, in words that I write across the front page of my Daytimer on the first day of each new year. "We are not human beings on a spiritual journey; we are spiritual beings on a human journey."

*Until we can see through the rules,
We will only see through the rules.*

R.D.Laing

So how does the group animator of a Future Search carry out her role? She begins with awareness that to look into the heart of an organization or community, she must be able to see beyond the techniques that she is using.

What R.D. Laing said years ago about rules is also relevant to group animation techniques and processes. Until we can learn to see *through* the process--recognize what is happening to individuals, organizations and communities in the real world beneath the process-- we will focus our attention on the process and only learn about the process itself. We won't learn about the community or organization.

Over the years, I've tried to "see through" the various group animation processes I use in my work. I've come to recognize five basic steps that seem an essential part of most group experiences. I think of them as the "principles of reframing" and they tend to be cyclical. Here is how I apply them to the Future Search process.

1. Consciousness raising. Long before we ever get involved in a Future Search, the participants have a certain consciousness about what led them to decide upon a Future search in the first place. This consciousness level is the primary manifestation of Spirit and is the foundation of all that has happened in the past and is about to happen in the future--especially in the Future Search. The animator raises consciousness by helping the group discern its own consciousness. ("What's happening in your community or organization that makes you feel the need for a Future Search? Let's talk about it"). Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff have often noted they sometimes spend as much time in the planning session as in the actual Future Search. I think planning is very much about consciousness raising.
2. Probing. The animator continually "probes" the expectations and desires of the clients primarily by asking probing-type questions. These questions, properly crafted, probe basic assumptions and manifest the various aspects of the life-experience of the organization. To use another analogy, probes are like those little round "thingies" that the Starship Enterprise sends out to find out if there is life on an alien planet--and to determine whether people can actually breathe "down there." Probes are revelatory. (documenting history, mind map and analysis, Prouds and Sorries).
3. Modelling. The animator helps the participants pull together the results of probes into models. Things come together as a whole and begin to take shape. (The Future Scenarios)
4. Testing: The animator helps the larger group consolidate its vision after the various smaller groups place their visions up on the wall. This is a consensus building exercise and, because it sometimes can be difficult, I tend to think of it as a distinct stage in the Future Search process.

5. Transformation. This is the final step of commitment--where people really decide to buy in (or not to buy in as the case may be). It manifests itself in the action planning--and most especially in the follow-up after we turn off the lights and return to our homes and offices.

The great beauty and genius of the Future Search model is that it embraces and continually manifests interiority, differentiation and communion--on almost every level. As the process evolves, the group becomes more conscious of its own inner identity. It acknowledges, respects and takes advantage of the diversity of opinions and interests. It gradually establishes a relationship-based sense of community within the group and, through the action plans, with the broader community. Further, the model enables the participants, rather than the animator, to raise consciousness, probe, model, test and transform each other. The role of the animator really is to discern and channel spirit--and trust the process.

By way of conclusion, a final note about the need for a conceptual framework based on the foundation of living organisms and living communities linked to a living universe.

For some this may seem a radical, new idea. But, it is actually a very old idea--and has the benefit of longevity.

In the Second Century AD, the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius wrote...

Constantly regard the universe as one living being, having one substance and one soul; and observe how all things have reference to one perception, the perception of this one living being; and how all things act with one movement; and how all things are cooperating causes of all things which exist; observe too the continuous spinning of the thread and the contexture of the web.

(From Moses Hadas, *Essential Works of Stoicism*, Bantam Books, New York, 1960 (4.40))

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