

Toward an ecology of spirit: A new paradigm for organisational development

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ABSTRACT

When we ask about "The Nature of Organisations" we are not simply asking about their characteristics. We are asking, quite literally, about organisations as *part of nature*--infused with the same energy force or Spirit that links the Spirit of the living universe and planet, to our own personal Spirit, to the Spirit of our organisations. This requires a new way of thinking about organisations and our role in them, a way of thinking based upon what we call an *Ecology of Spirit*.

In this article the author describes his own journey of Spirit, at times painful, from his early days as a Roman Catholic monk and priest, to his work as a street-worker in American inner cities, to his present work in the Canadian Arctic. For the past two decades he has worked in the North with Inuit and Dene (Indian) peoples in the areas of community and organisational development. His discovery of an Ecology of Spirit has emerged from convergence of two streams of thought: the traditional teaching of the aboriginal elders and the lessons of the New Science which has abandoned the machine model of organisational development and sees organisations as living organisms.

In the final section of the paper the author offers some practical suggestions. He discusses the need to discover a new way of being in organisations based upon our ability to discern Spirit, discover our own inner Spirit, and animate the Spirit of our organisations.

Introduction

I was introduced to the concept of an Ecology of Spirit twenty years ago, when I first heard the stories of the Inuit elders. Of course it wasn't called an "Ecology of Spirit" back in those days, and I really didn't recognise the significance of those stories. I "had ears to hear but I did not hear." As I will show in what follows, I was pre-disposed, through my struggles with my own religious background and my professional training, to reject the stories and teachings of the elders. I believed that they had no practical application to the hard-nosed realities of community life and organisational development. In time I learned the error of my ways.

As I came to terms with my own Spirit and saw the severe limitations of my professional tools in which I once had so much confidence, I went through a sort of vocational crisis. I began to read widely, attend conferences throughout Canada and the United States, and think hard about the need for a new approach to organisational development. I discovered that a new story is emerging, based upon a New Science. It is questioning many of our assumptions about communities and organisations and it is providing a set of new assumptions about the nature of organisations and how they work. To my great surprise and astonishment these new assumptions are echoing many elements of the traditional teachings and wisdom of the elders.

In this paper I piece together the elements of Ecology of Spirit which I suggest must be the new foundation community and organisational development, not only in the North but everywhere.

A personal journey of spirit

THE TEACHINGS OF THE ELDERS

In the early 1980s I spent a lot of time sitting in community meetings in small Inuit settlements in the Eastern

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Arctic. I was the superintendent of the Department of Social Services and the purpose of these meetings was to deal with community issues, explain the department's services, and get feedback on how we were doing.

One of the features of these meetings was the statements of elders. We would be moving right along in our discussion, dealing with some important issue, when an elder would get up and start talking about life on the land, how people used to relate to one another, or the characteristics of seals or whales or some other animal. The people in the room would always listen respectfully, and at times I found the stories interesting. But I also found them "off topic" and, for the most part, irrelevant to the issues we were dealing with.

On my bad days I found myself getting impatient, even annoyed at the elders' comments. After all, people no longer lived on the land. They lived in settlements--in a world of municipal structures, social service and economic development committees, job descriptions, budgets, financial systems – the things of the modern world. I had no doubt about the cultural value of the elders' stories; I just didn't think they were relevant to the kinds of problems communities were now dealing with. A few years later, when I moved to the Western Arctic and started visiting Dene communities, the same thing happened – more community meetings, more serious community problems to deal with, more stories from the elders, more distractions and "off topic" discussions.

In the last few years I've looked back on those early days, trying to determine why I was so unsympathetic – so oblivious to what was really happening. Why did I not bother to listen more carefully? Why did I reject back then a set of teachings that I now consider essential for any serious understanding of organisations?

I've concluded that my negative reactions were based upon two personal problems--fear and arrogance. Explaining is going to take a while.

BEWARE OF PEOPLE WHO "PUT THINGS IN"

I've always been afraid of people who want to "put things in". My fear stems from my very close association with the Roman Catholic Church over a period of some 15 years. As a young man I lived and worked as a monk and a priest. My decision to break with my past was not an easy one; it has much to do with the desire of the Church to want to "put things in". Let me explain.

I left the institutional Church, though not my Christian faith, because I found it to be completely out of touch with the realities of modern life, or at least that part of modern life that I was dealing with. I had done volunteer work with heroin addicts and male prostitutes in New York City's Manhattan House of Detention ("The Tombs") on the lower East Side, and with kids in a settlement house in Spanish Harlem. I had also worked as a hospital chaplain in Baltimore, and as a student chaplain in France during the student riots that broke out in May of 1968. For me, my priesthood had become a battleground strewn with the corpses of fruitless discussions – about the failure of the Church to condemn the War in Vietnam; about its position on birth control, on homosexuality, and on divorce; about its sexual teachings that had been developed by a celibate clergy; about its rejection of a married clergy, and its refusal to recognise the role of women; about the hostility of Rome towards a Theology of Liberation with its option for the poor. As a young priest I soon discovered that my personal position on these issues was on a collision course with the position of the church, so I left my religious order and the priesthood to seek solace and guidance elsewhere.

Looking back I now recognise that I rejected the institutional Church because it kept wanting to "put something in" (Note 1). Divorced Catholics who had re-married, those catholic couples practising birth control, those who were gay with an active sexual life – they were all living in a "state of sin" and could not return to a state of grace until the Church "put something in" – recognition, forgiveness, its blessing, its imprimatur. But my experience led me to believe that it was not necessary to "put something in" *because there was already something in there* – deep within the fabric of relationships, values, the human experience and, indeed, the whole cosmos. What this "something" was I was not sure, but it seemed to be a presence, a living reality, a source of energy – a Spirit.

I simply could not believe that married couples who loved one another and were practising birth control were in a "state of sin". I could not accept that the love, affection and caring of gay and lesbian couples I saw around me were somehow distorted, or unnatural, or unreal. I could not understand how those of us protesting against the War in Vietnam and sometimes breaking the law were evil or sinful – despite the Cardinal of New York's statement, as he blessed the troops going off to fight atheistic Marxism in Vietnam, that they were "Soldiers of Christ". I could not believe that it was in any way necessary for the Church to somehow validate the human experience by putting into it the acknowledgement of divine presence.

As I continued to discover the presence of Spirit in my work I frequently thought of Christ's words to Nicodemus in St. John's Gospel about presence and elusiveness of the Spirit: "The wind blows where it pleases; you can hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:8). In terms of the church hierarchy and its insistence that that it alone could define the true way, I took solace in an ancient theological principle: *lex orandi, lex credenda* – "The law of prayer, is the law of belief". Roughly translated it means that what the worshipping church believes is, or becomes, the law of the church. From my point of view, "putting something in" was simply a desire on the part of the Church to control things from the outside. Even worse, *it was a failure to recognise or acknowledge the presence of something on the inside*. My point of view became very much a conviction one day about a year after I had left the active priesthood.

I received a call from the chancery office in Milwaukee asking me to come down and discuss the request I had made to Rome a number of months before, that I be dispensed from my vows as monk and a priest. By this time I had married "outside the Church" and was a street-worker on Milwaukee's East Side, working for the Lutheran Church. I was spending my days setting up crisis lines, street-level health centres, houses for runaways, and raising funds to purchase and outfit an old bus, paint it in psychedelic colours with "ACID RESCUE" emblazoned on the side and send it off to tour the rock concert sites. To build a base of support for my work I helped create an "ecumenical church cluster" – a group of inner city churches that were willing to work together and turn over space and resources to deal with the problems of the drug culture. I was often asked to preach at Sunday morning worship services in these churches and explain the work I was doing.

When I entered the meeting room in the chancery office I was invited to sit at a table. On the other side of the table were an elderly monsignor, two canon lawyers and a stenographer. The monsignor led me through a long series of questions about why I wanted to be dispensed from my vows. After answering the questions as truthfully as possible, I was informed that I could receive my dispensation on several conditions, one of which was that I quit my job and move my family and myself out of the community where I was living because I was a "scandal to the people". I explained the work I was doing, the physical risks to myself and my family, my frequent presentations in local churches, and I suggested to the Monsignor that I didn't think the people in my community, or the members of the various congregations, considered me a scandal. The monsignor responded in what I have always considered the classic example of "putting something in". He said, in words that will seem quite convoluted to those who are unfamiliar with Roman Catholic theology, "Don't you want to make your natural acts supernaturally meritorious?" In other words, my activities were not going to do much to get me to heaven because they were only "natural acts". They could not become "supernatural" and help me "merit salvation" unless the church "put something in": unless it forgave me and thus made my activities "meritorious" in the eyes of God¹.

I'm sure that for those who were not raised in a strict Roman Catholic tradition, the story of my own struggles with the Church will seem bizarre in the extreme. ('Why didn't you just get out and "get a life"?') I have no doubt that the Church has changed somewhat from my early days. Priests that leave today don't go through most of what I went through. The rigidly narrow theological perspective of the monsignor is probably not the theological position of most Roman Catholic clergy today. Nor do I pretend that my experience with the Roman Catholic Church is in any way objective. (The years have helped with the healing, but some of the pain and anger is still there.) But that's the way it was for me. And out of my experience emerged a strong belief that when we "put things in" to the human or organisational situation, two things happen. First we focus our attention on what we have put in. "The map becomes the territory", so to speak. Second, we cover over or mask what is already there.

I suspect that my failure to listen to, and open up to, the teachings of the elders was based upon fear – a knee jerk reaction, emerging out of my own religious and spiritual insecurities. I assumed that the elders wanted to "put something in" that would mask the real seriousness of the situations we were dealing with. Had I been more in touch with my own Spirit, I would have realised they were not "putting something in". They were describing something that was already there – the Spirit of a living universe manifesting itself in the land around us and in the relationships that link us to the universe and to one another.

THE SEARCH FOR THE MAGIC ANSWER

The second reason why I rejected the teachings of the elders was arrogance. I didn't need what they had to say, because I was a professional and I had at my disposal an array of professional tools: tools like strategic planning, re-engineering, performance measures, value for money auditing, total quality management, quality

circles, and self-directed teams. These tools were embedded in their own mythology, the mythology of cut-throat competition and survival of the fittest, productivity at all costs, value for money, bureaucracy bashing, downsizing, and the new religion of total commitment to the customer.

These tools are alluring. Like many consultants I don't like bureaucracy and I've been looking for "the magic answer" – the right tool or tools that will help me work effectively with organisations. And these seemed to be the right tools. So I put the quaint cultural stories of the elders up on the shelf, and I got down to business with the real tools.

But then I began to notice things, in my own practice and in the practice of others, that made me question these "real tools". For every article I read on the great benefits of re-engineering, there was another on why re-engineering doesn't work. For every article on the power of teams, there was another on the problems with teams. I was having the same experience in my work.

Though the tools I was using seemed more or less effective, they didn't seem to bring about real organisational change.

I began to observe some common problems.

1. In many cases ***the changes we wanted going in weren't happening***. I'd spend months helping a group develop a vision, create a strategic plan, or design a new system. I'd run around the Territories with a group of politicians developing an economic strategy. But when I'd come back a few months later, after I handed in the glossy report, often nothing had changed.

Sometimes it was a case of the rapidly changing service environment overtaking the strategic plan. The plan had a beard on it the day it was born. But more often it seemed to go deeper. Organisations had a terrible time getting from the planning stage to implementation. They couldn't seem to get off the paper down into the hearts and minds and spirits of the people in their organisations. There was a whole world down there – and we didn't seem to have the tools to reach into it. I was glad my work wasn't on warranty.

2. Even though we know that human organisations are open systems, ***the techniques we use are closed systems techniques***. What our organisations need is order. What they are getting is control. We are trying to keep the mischievous information genie locked in the bottle under control, by our structures, or our policies or our regulations. We fail to realise that information is in itself a "spiritual reality". It is an energy force that "informs" or "gives form to". The genie of information is already out of the bottle. It is the life force of our new economy. It's our organisations and our rigid mindsets that are often locked in the bottle.

3. Even though I was personally convinced that it is people that produce results, not systems, procedures or policies, ***almost everything we are trying to do, including some of the ways we are going about setting up teams, is based upon adapting the needs of the individual to the needs of the organisation and its vision, its systems, its procedures***. This dawned on me one day several summers ago. I was in Rankin Inlet, a small Inuit village on the West Coast of Hudson Bay, working with a group of middle managers. I was at a point in the workshop where I was reviewing the various management theories – from Frederick Taylor's scientific method down through Tom Peters. It suddenly occurred to me that we have been promoting a dangerous myth. We've been telling people that if you want to succeed as a manager in business or government, if you really want to get ahead, you have to dedicate yourself to the task and sacrifice part of your relationship with your family, your community, and the land that surrounds you – and your own personal aspirations.

4. Though we are preaching the gospel of whole systems thinking, one of the pillars of the new information economy paradigm, ***we continue to implement this gospel through the reductionist techniques of the industrial age paradigm***. The whole system is only equal to the sum of the parts. No matter how you hack it, process mapping is still a reductionist technique that tries to put Humpty Dumpty together from the sum of his parts. This is especially true of people. We isolate them from their essential relationships (family, community, etc) and try and "slot them in" to a process.

Tom Peters used to tell the story of a manager with a credit card company who was so dedicated to customer service that he once spent five days in a dugout canoe chasing a client up a crocodile infested river in Africa so he could replace the guy's lost credit card. When I heard the story I felt like standing up and screaming, "What about the guy's wife and children? What did they think of his dedication to the job?"

5. As the various books and techniques came along, I have had the continual feeling that there ***was no new intellectual or conceptual foundation to help us work with information-age organisations***. We were trying to

build the new techniques on the foundation set by Taylor, Maslow, McGregor, and the Hawthorne studies. It was simply new wine in old wine skins.

As I read the works of Tom Peters, Michael Hammer and the others, I couldn't help thinking of what my fellow Canadian Marshall McLuhan once said, that we always seem to introduce new approaches wrapped in the technology of the old paradigm. The first films were film version of stage plays. We called the first automobiles "horseless carriages". And, in modern terms the Deming Management Method and ISO 9000, from my point of view, are simply Frederick Taylor, and the time-and-motion approach of Frank and Lillian Gilbreth, "in drag". It may look new, but it is the same old paradigm approach that came to full flowering in the industrial economy, and was based upon the reductionist philosophy of Descartes, the scientific method of Bacon and the physics of Galileo.

I also began to suspect that our "new management techniques" – techniques that I was sometimes teaching – were indeed masking over the true nature of organisational life. We were treating symptoms, not the causes of illness. Even worse, we were spending inordinate amounts of time trying to repair the systems that we ourselves had introduced, *in the hopes* that the systems were responding to real needs. We were using our new systems as steroids to create instant response time, bulk and bureaucracy, and short-term competitive gains. And while we were doing this, we were risking and sometimes burning out our "human capital". Most serious of all, we had become so intent with the "add ons" – whether they be systems, or policies, or targets for market share – that we weren't bothering to tap into the real Spirit of the organisations. Instead were damping it down with rhetorical medications and propping it up with technological prostheses. We had failed to recognise the natural and holistic approach to creating viable organisations based upon learning, shared values, balanced and healthy people and supportive primary relationships.

As you might expect, when all this stuff began to dawn on me, I began going through a vocational crisis. (I've been through them before so I knew what was happening.) I felt a bit like the Prophet Elijah, in the First Book of Kings, who was running from Jezebel and travelling forty days and forty nights until he reached Mount Horeb. He was whacked out and bit spinney and he went to sleep in a cave. In his sleep he heard a voice telling him to go out and stand at the entrance to the cave because the Lord Yahweh was going to pass by. So he did. And there was a hurricane, but Yahweh wasn't in the hurricane. And then an earthquake came by, but Yahweh wasn't in the earthquake. Then came a firestorm, but Yahweh wasn't in the firestorm. And then he heard, in the words of the King James Version, a "still small voice". And it was Yahweh.

For me, as I stood at the mouth of the cave looking out at the organisations I was working with, the answer wasn't in Re-engineering, and it wasn't in Total Quality Management, and it wasn't in the self-directed teams or fanatical customer service.

It was in the "still small voice" called Spirit.

I remembered something Albert Einstein once said about not looking for solutions in the same place you find the problems. So I began a personal journey: reading widely, and attending workshops, and I discovered that there is a new story about organisations now being written, a story with profound implications for those who work with organisations.

The new story

It is hard to tell this new story, for it is a story that's just beginning. It's being lived and written about by a precious few people with a consuming interest in organisations who are creating the conceptual paradigm we need to understand organisations in the information age. But, interestingly, they are not seeking answers from other organisational theorists. They need new answers for a new paradigm, so they are turning to the world of cosmology, quantum physics, chemistry, theology, systems theory, psychology – the whole range of sciences and disciplines that we refer to as the "New Science" (Note 2).

With my limited background, especially in modern science, I'm only getting pieces of the story, but I'll share with you, briefly, the glimmerings I have. This next bit will be a sort of collage – some names and concepts – that have piqued my interest.

The story begins by situating organisations in the context of a much broader universe. This universe is **a living universe**, it's a universe with purpose and destiny, and it is a universe that links individuals and organisations. For James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis, authors of *The Gaia Hypothesis*, the earth is a living organism that continually creates conditions which support life. For the priest palaeontologist, Teilhard de Chardin, this living universe is a universe infused with purpose and calling. As Teilhard once put it: "*We are not human beings on a*

spiritual journey...we are spiritual beings on a human journey." For David Bohm there is an "implicate order" – a certain wholeness that exists at a level that we can't discern. For the "geologist" and cosmologist Thomas Berry, this universe is a collection of living subjects, not a collection of objects put there for our pleasure. The universe is the primordial source of revelation, the only text without a context. Everything we know or think about God, or the sacred or mystery or human dignity, we have learned through our meditations on the natural world that surrounds us.

In this new story, we *always* see our organisations in the context of this living universe. We begin to appreciate that there are forces at work within organisations that we are only beginning to understand, and some of which we will never understand. We live in a world of chaos that every organisation needs for its growth, and somehow, mysteriously, order comes out chaos. Rupert Sheldrake talks to us about morphogenic fields that influence our behaviour and provide us with knowledge that has been accumulated in the human species field. The chemist and Nobel Prize winner Ilya Prigogine talks to us about dissipative structures that react to their environment and regenerate themselves to higher levels of self-organisation. We learn to look upon our organisations not as carefully controlled and perfectly ordered machines but as living open systems in a continual state of bounded instability.

Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela have helped us recognise the link between cognition, life and *autopoiesis*, the capacity of organisations and networks to "make themselves". And in the new scheme of things, information, as Margaret Wheatley tells us, is that spiritual energy force that gives order, prompts growth and defines what is alive. We are not managing information. Information is managing us.

In this new story, the individual is a spiritual being, part of the living universe, who contains within him or her, deeply imbedded in the DNA, the record of parents, ancestors, and, indeed the story of the whole universe. The individual is *in relationship*.

This new story recognises the workplace as an essentially spiritual place. One day, when someone asked Deepak Chopra about how to put spirituality into the workplace, Chopra said, "You are asking the wrong question. You and the workplace and your organisations are already "in the Spirit", the Spirit of a living universe. As Fritjof Capra (see Note 3) has noted, "When the concept of human spirit is understood as the mode of consciousness in which the individual feels connected to the cosmos as a whole, it becomes clear that the ecological awareness is spiritual in its deepest sense." (Capra, *The Turning Point*, p. 12)

Finally, the new story is emerging out of the work of practitioners. I'm thinking here of the Open Space techniques of Harrison Owen (one of the first to speak seriously about Spirit in organisations) and the Future Search technology of Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff. These three remind us that the real struggle is not one of exchanging intellectual concepts and beliefs about Spirit. It is the challenge of providing opportunities for people in the workplace to experience Spirit and continue to nurture and channel it.

As I contemplated the new story I began to discover people all around me who were experiencing what I was experiencing, and looking for what I was looking for. They, too, had grown tired of climbing up the corporate ladder, pursuing the latest fad, having their fax machines and mail boxes stuffed with advertisements about training programs that would give them the "competitive edge".

Mostly they were tired of being used up by their organisations. I sensed that many of them wanted, not just a job, but a *new way of being in organisations*; a way that would let them give everything they had to give – all their creativity, and commitment, and love – without causing them to flame out, crash and burn, and careen against the barren surface of rigid structures and de-personalising bureaucracies. In a word, they were seeking balance in their lives so they could be healthy people in healthy organisations.

Then a funny thing happened. I noticed some of the most unlikely people – physicists, biologists, philosophers, mathematicians, systems thinkers, and some of the organisational types I was meeting at conferences – were talking about aboriginal peoples, their worldview and their spirituality. I knew that most of these people had very little direct experience with aboriginal people or their spirituality. But I did. And I wasn't seeing what they were seeing, and I wasn't hearing what they were hearing. So I began to reflect, and remember, and listen to my own spirit. And I had what Yogi Berra often referred to as "that old déjà vu experience all over again". Somewhere in the depths of my soul I began to hear the voice of the elders talking from meetings years back – about a living universe and connectedness, and vocation and responsibility. It was the still small voice of Spirit.

I began to realise that there is a Spirit bridge joining wisdom of the past to the new science of the present, a bridge that allows us to cross over into a deeper understanding of organisations. A bridge whose pillars are

embedded in the foundation of an Ecology of Spirit.

An Ecology of Spirit

In the pages that follow I will suggest that what so many of us want – a new way of being in organisations – requires a new way of thinking about organisations. And a new way of thinking about organisations requires a new conceptual framework or paradigm. This paradigm is what I call an Ecology of Spirit. We begin with a definition.

DEFINING ECOLOGY OF SPIRIT

The word "ecology" comes from the Greek, "oikos" which means "household". Ecology is the study of the earth household. More specifically, it is the study of the relationships that interlink all members of the earth household.³

The word "spirit" literally means "breath". It comes from the Latin "spiritus" which means "breath"(Note 4). It refers to an energy or dynamic life force that expresses the inner soul or essence of a being.

The Term "Ecology of Spirit" then, is the *study of that complex set of relationships and systems, infused with an inner life-force (or Spirit), that links the land and its creatures, to individuals, people, communities, organisations, and to the entire universe.*

When we think about life and living things, all of us recognise the reality of human, animal and plant life. Some of us may even be able to recognise the universe as a living reality. But organisations? Outside of the fact that they have people working within them, few of us would see organisations themselves as living realities.

Yet, this is precisely the point we are about to explore in this paper. I will argue that organisations are not lifeless entities, separate and apart from the world in which they exist. They exist in relationships to the rest of the universe. The same Spirit that infuses and gives life to the rest of the universe is also the life-principle of organisations. As Margaret Wheatley has noted:

We are beginning to recognize organizations as systems, construing them as "learning organizations" and crediting them with some kind of self-renewing capacity. These are our first tentative forays into a new appreciation for organizations. My own experience suggests that we can forego the despair created by such common organizational events as change, chaos, information overload, and cyclical behaviour if we recognize that organizations are conscious entities, possessing many of the properties of living systems."(Note 5)

We begin our exploration with the teachings of the elders.

THE TEACHINGS OF THE ELDERS

In aboriginal cultures, elders are teachers. Their teachings are inevitably lessons in proper behaviour and "right living" based upon an earth-based cosmology--a deep understanding of the land, (the physical universe) and the behaviour of its creatures.

Though the teachings may vary, depending upon the particular aboriginal culture, they all seem to share a common set of fundamental principles. Here is my understanding of these principles, based upon what I've heard at meetings and from reading some of the writings of elders.

1. ***Each person born into this life is a unique individual with his or her own Spirit or energy force (sometimes referred to as "medicine power") that manifests itself in one's personality and lifestyle.*** This spirit confers upon the individual a role or purpose. Each one of us is called to recognise this Spirit in ourselves and in others. Along with this recognition come certain duties and responsibilities.

2. ***Our primary relationship as spiritual beings is with the land.*** The land is living. "It was created by "the one who provides for all, and we came from this land"(Note 6). It is our father and our mother, our guide and our teacher, our healer and the source of our energy and vitality. If we destroy the land, we destroy ourselves. We don't own the land. It owns us. It is our relationship with the land that renews Spirit and keeps it alive.

3. ***We are called to live in community (Note 7) – first of all with the land and its creatures, then with our natural and extended families, our communities, and with people in other communities with whom we share the land.*** The call to community links us to our ancestors, to our traditions and to our culture and contains within it clearly defined responsibilities to future generations (Note 8).

4. If the land is living, and we are living, and our families and communities are living, then **our organisations must be living**. They have unique Spirits that are linked to our culture. *Our organisations can only be as healthy as our culture; and our culture can only be as healthy as our organisations*. As members of organisations we are called to represent and serve our people--and to care for and nurture the Spirit of our organisations.

5. If we are to succeed in our calling we must find a way of *re-aligning our primary relationships and maintaining a balance of Spirit*. Our primary relationships are our relationships with:

- the Spirit of the land
- ourselves and our personal Spirit
- the Spirit of our community: our families, relatives and the people who are closest to us
- the Spirit within our organisations and workplaces.

THE NEED FOR SYSTEMS THINKING

As we look closely at the teaching of the elders and try to apply them to organisations, we see that their teachings are very close to what the New Science calls systems thinking. Though the elders do not use the words "systems", or "networks" or "ecology", they present us with a world view that links everything, including our organisations, to a living universe. To apply their teachings we have to move away from the highly analytical and reductionist thinking of Descartes and adopt a systems thinking approach. Fritjof Capra has described the characteristics of this way of thinking.

The ideas set forth by organismic biologists during the first half of the century helped give birth to a new way of thinking--systems thinking--in terms of connectedness, relationships, context. According to the systems view, the essential properties of an organism, or living system, are properties of the whole which none of the parts have. They arise from the interactions and relationships among the parts. These properties are destroyed when the system is dissected, either physically or theoretically, into isolated elements. Although we can discern individual parts in a system, these parts are not isolated, and the nature of the whole system is always different from the mere sum of its parts. (Note 9)

Capra goes on to distinguish systems thinking from the kind of analytical thinking that we have traditionally used to try and understand our organisations.

The great shock of twentieth-century science has been that systems cannot be understood by analysis. The properties of the part are not intrinsic properties but can be understood only within the context of the larger whole. Thus the relationships between the parts and the whole has been reversed. In the systems approach the properties of the parts can be understood only from the organisation of the whole. Accordingly, systems thinking concentrates not on basic building blocks, but on the basic principles of organisation. Systems thinking is "contextual" which is the opposite of analytical thinking. Analysis means taking something apart in order to understand it; systems thinking means putting it into the context of a larger whole. (Note 10)

Applying the teachings of the elders to organisations

For those of us interested in organisations, trying to apply the teachings of the elders to organisations, using a systems thinking approach, is a bit like the problem that physicists have trying to determine whether sub-atomic elements are particles or waves. We are not used to this new way of thinking. We want to see things clearly. We want simple, straightforward, useable explanations. But just when we think we are getting somewhere, things tend to collapse in upon themselves. We are left dealing with "probabilities", which our parents taught us never to trust. And so, in our analysis of organisations, we are left looking at things through a glass darkly – having to resort to a combination of logic, intuition and fleeting glimpses into mysteries. As physicists say about their sub-atomic world – it's a bit weird.

Nevertheless, we can gain some insights by focusing on the essential elements of the teachings of the elders. These elements are the concepts of interconnectedness, spirit, purpose, and a fourth element that I will call vocation.

1. ALL THINGS ARE INTERCONNECTED.

The elders teach us that all things are interconnected. All things are linked to one another, relate to one

another, and share the same wholeness. Our organisations are inseparably linked to a larger outside world that helps define the nature of our organisation. The environment does not determine the nature of our organisation--that comes from within. But the outside world – the things the organisation is linked to – helps define the nature of the organisation. They give it its reason for existence. Thus, an organisation is not simply an entity in itself; it is an entity in *relationship*.

In practical terms we cannot understand the nature of any organisation unless we understand its relationships to its customers, its clients, the other organisations that are part of its existence, the environment that surrounds it, the universe of which is a part. Every organisation is part of a greater whole.

In like manner, it is the relationships within the organisation – how the people within the organisation relate to one another and to people outside of the organisation, that determine the nature of the organisation. For those of us accustomed to identifying an organisation as a stand-alone entity with its own programs, products, services, facilities, assets, stock prices, mission statements and legal structure, this idea will come as somewhat of a shock. But the elders teach us that organisations are part of a greater whole, and it is an organisation's relationship to this greater whole which gives it its meaning.

2. ORGANISATIONS ARE LIVING ORGANISMS WITH A LIFE-SPIRIT.

According to the elders, organisations share, to varying degrees, the Life-Spirit that links the organisation to its environment and to the universe as a whole. This life force manifests itself in different forms: as animal life, human life, the life within community, the life of the universe itself. But here is the important part: this is the always the same life force or Spirit. It is the same unifying element that brings things into relationship with one another. As Teilhard de Chardin has noted, "We are not human beings on spiritual journey, we are spiritual beings on a human journey."

Because they are part of living systems, organisations enjoy a fundamental characteristic of living systems: consciousness. And here we are talking not only about the ability of people within organisations to reflect upon their existence as members of those organisations. We are also talking about the ability of the organisation as a whole to function as a conscious entity. (I told you we would enter the realm of mystery). This ability of an organisation to function as a conscious entity relates to its ability to deal with information. Getting our mind around this concept has something to do with getting beyond our tendency to always identify consciousness with the human mind. As Margaret Wheatley notes:

If the capacity to deal with information, to communicate, defines a system as conscious, then the world is rich in consciousness extending to include even those things we have classified as inanimate. Consciousness occurs in systems that do not even have a human brain... Organizations, then, are conscious entities with the capacity for generating and absorbing information, for feedback, for self-regulation. (Note 11)

The concept that an organisation or even a community can have a consciousness that is greater than the individual consciousness of its members is not a new concept. For centuries the Jewish People have thought of themselves as "God's Chosen People" and many Christians have thought of themselves part of the Mystical Body of Christ. What's new is the awareness that organisational consciousness is not simply a religious phenomenon. It extends to all living organisations that deal with information.

3. ORGANISATIONS HAVE A BUILT-IN SENSE OF PURPOSE AND ORDER.

The elders are quite clear that things are created for a purpose – to fulfil a certain pre-determined destiny. Closely tied to this concept of purpose is the recognition of a certain inherent order manifested most directly in the mysteries of nature: the seasonal changes, the migrations, the cycles of births and death. Even natural catastrophes – floods, forest fires, earthquakes – are seen as part of the plan, part of the inevitable chaos that gives rise to order and harmony.

The New Science identifies this phenomenon of purpose and order with the concept of *self-organisation*, a characteristic of all living systems. Chaos and complexity theories have helped us understand that living systems, including organisations, must go through periods of upheaval and change. And yet, they tend to be conscious of certain boundaries that allow them to grow while maintaining their identities (and/or to merge into a higher identity as the case may be).

When it comes to applying the teachings of purpose and order to organisations, nothing seems more difficult. For generations our business schools have been teaching that organisations are static entities that simply do

not exist beyond the processes and actions that individuals take within them. Because managers do not recognise organisations as living entities, they do not recognise any inherent order within organisations. On the contrary, they recognise the inherent tendency of organisations to "get out of control". And so, because they do not recognise organisations as living entities, they confuse the organisation's need for order with control. Rather than opening themselves up to the living Spirit within organisations, they confuse the map with the territory. They spend most of their time tinkering with the systems and processes – many of them atomic fly swatters which they themselves have imposed.

4. THE VOCATION OF BEING IN ORGANISATIONS

In a world where many of us are accustomed to changing jobs almost like we change our clothing, the concept of "*a call to being within an organisation*" in a way where we recognise and nurture its Spirit seems strange indeed. Yet that seems to be the teaching of the elders. For them the organisation is a reflection of the people – serving their needs and sharing their Spirit: "Our organisations will be strong if our culture is strong; and our culture will be strong if our organisations are strong".

The call to be within an organisation and care for its Spirit does not mean a life of total, unquestioning commitment to an organisation. We are not talking "burn-out city" here. On the contrary, the teaching of the elders always speaks of the need to maintain a balance. While living the life of our organisations we must reconcile and harmonise the call of the Spirit of the organisation with our other primary relationships: with our own inner Spirit and with the Spirit of our human community – our own family, relatives and friends. We can't keep entering the rat race temporarily fortified with stress reduction workshops; we can't have healthy organisations populated with sick people.

In a special way, we must reconcile the demands of the Spirit of our organisations with the demands of the Spirit of the land and the universe. For many of us who work with large corporations or government departments in large cities, our exposure to nature might mean raking leaves on the weekend, the occasional walk in park, or a summer vacation off the beaten path. But is this enough to nourish our Spirit? Our relationship with the living universe is not only a primary relationship, it is the *primordial relationship*, the relationship of the "first order". It is the foundation for all other relationships. Our Spirit has come from the Spirit of the land, and our Spirit will return to the Spirit of the land.

Re-discovering and realigning our organisational relationships with our relationships to the land does not mean that we must move out of the cities, abandon our companies and adopt some kind of aboriginal lifestyle. The teaching of the elders is not about lifestyles; it is about relationships. Renewing the Spirit of our organisations means finding ways of "going deeper": finding our way beneath our organisational coding, our personal and family coding, and our cultural coding to discover our genetic coding. Our individual Spirit and the Spirit of our organisations has come from the Spirit of the universe.

The genius of the elders, and the significance of their teaching, has been their ability to uncover universal truths that are part of the universal human experience and consciousness. In the Second Century the 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 the cooperating causes of all things which exist; observe too the continuous spinning of the thread and the contexture of the web. (Note 12)

Discerning the spirit of organisations

How do we recognise or "discern" (literally, to "separate out") Spirit in our organisations?

Though the discerning of Spirit is not an exact science (it seems to rely as much upon intuition as logic), I think we can make headway by knowing what to look for and how to look.

What to Look For. We know that Spirit is something more than a temporary outburst of emotional enthusiasm (team spirit) and we know that it is not some kind of super-imposed expression of religious fervour. We also know that it is not something that manifests itself primarily in structures, systems, procedures, services and products. I think we recognise Spirit in all of those things that our management science has chosen to label "soft" or "touchy-feely" or – dare we say it – "feminine". Spirit is a life principle that manifests itself primarily in relationships and processes. The way people relate to one another in the workplace, and the way they relate

to people outside the organisation tells us a great deal about Spirit in an organisation. The processes – the way they make decisions, communicate with one another, share information, carry out work, create a work environment – these things give us a clue about the true identity of the organisation. Also important are the rituals: the stories people tell, the events they celebrate, the values they hold in common, the myths and symbols they share.

Of special significance are those four abilities which are touchstones for Spirit within organisations. They flow from the principles of consciousness and self-organisation. They are the ability to *vision*, to pursue the vision through *leadership*, to *heal* its members and its relationships with others, and to learn so that it can continually remain in *relationship* with its environment.

How to discern Spirit. I think there are two indispensable tools needed to discern Spirit: reflection and dialogue.

It continually occurs to me in my practice as an organisational consultant that people hire me to do their thinking for them, because they do not have time to think for themselves. I suspect that there is very little I do that people couldn't do for themselves if they just took the time to do it.

Most people working within organisations find very little time for reflection, or meditation, or visioning, or thinking, or whatever you want to call it. They are run off their feet and live their life in meetings. They are drowning in information but starved for knowledge. Any reflecting they do usually occurs on their way home from work at night, tossing and turning in their beds in the wee hours, or on their way back to work in the morning. In the workplace we are not at ease with silence. The person who sits in silence and thinks is... well... odd, and costing the company money.

I suspect that our ability to discern Spirit within our organisation begins with an ability to discern our own Spirit – to go deep within ourselves to discover the essence of our being and its essential relationships. And I think the practice of doing this on a regular, even daily basis, whether we call it meditation, prayer, visioning, or just plain thinking – is the indispensable key that opens the door to the discovery of Spirit within our organisation. (For this reason I have introduced the practice of silent reflection into many of my workshops).

Dialogue is not just talk. As David Bohm has noted, it is the ability to engage in meaningful discourse with another or with others in an effort to discover the deeper issues, rather than just staying on the surface of things (Note 13). It is the willingness to explore our assumptions, it is the courage to reframe. It is the twin, the indispensable partner, of reflection because silence is an indispensable dimension of dialogue. As someone once said, "Dialogue is about creating sacred space through conversation."

Reflection and dialogue are essential tools for anyone seeking to discover the spirit of organisations and finding a new way of being within organisations. But they are especially important for those in leadership positions. As Harrison Owen has pointed out, leadership is the capacity to focus Spirit. Empowering Spirit is what leadership is all about (Note 14).

The true leader is a dowser who uses relationships to divine and nourish the Life-Spirit of the organisation.

The challenge of Spirit

In this paper I've described a personal journey in search of a new way of working with organisations. It began in the small Inuit communities on Baffin Island listening to the elders. It passed through periods of struggle with my own religious Spirit and with a certain disillusionment with traditional organisational practices. It emerged with the discoveries of the New Story emerging out of the New Science. And it has come full circle with the development of a bridge joining the teachings of the elders with the insights of the New Science, resting on the foundation of an Ecology of Spirit. The bridge allows us to pass over into a new and deeper understanding of our organisations.

Today I find myself in that somewhat mysterious and strange territory that Thomas Kuhn described when he talked about paradigm shifts. I can't go back to the way things were, but the future is not at all certain. I think many of you may find yourselves exactly where I am. We care passionately about our organisations. But we are seeking a new way of understanding what is happening with them and how to live and work within them.

My personal journey has led me to a fork in the road. One road is well worn and familiar. It is the road of our traditional approaches to organisations. Unfortunately it leads nowhere and doubles back upon itself. If you or I take this road we will find ourselves a lot older, none the wiser, worn out, and right back where we started.

The other road is not very well marked. It is the road of an earth-based spirituality that leads to a deeper understanding of the Spirit of organisations. It holds the promise of real learning: the discovery of how to live healthy lives in healthy organisations and communities.

Yogi Berra once said, "When you come to the fork in the road, take it." I intend to take it – to go as far down the road as I possibly can."

Notes:

1. The desire to "put something in" is not an exclusively Roman Catholic phenomenon. I've experienced the same phenomenon among some of the more fundamentalist Protestant denominations. Typically a small group of businessmen would gather for a breakfast/prayer meeting on a Monday morning and spend the rest of the week trying to "put Christ into the workplace." The implication was that the workplace was either a place of sin and/or a place that was without the Spirit of Christ – and therefore nothing really important was happening there.
2. The New Science comes from the disciplines of physics, biology, and chemistry and from theories of evolution and chaos that span several disciplines. Unlike the Newtonian model of the world which is characterised by materialism and reductionism, the New Science focuses on relationships rather than things. It abandons the concept that there are "basic building blocks of nature". It emphasises holism, processes, and systems and relies heavily upon insights from the world of sub-atomic physics
3. Fritjof Capra, *The Web of Life*, Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1996 p. 32.
4. The word for "soul" means "breath" in many ancient languages: Sanskrit ("atman"), Greek ("pneuma") and Latin ("anima"). The same is true of the word "spirit": in Latin ("spiritus"), in Greek ("psyche") and in the Hebrew ("ruah"). All of these words mean "breath". Capra, p 264.
5. Margaret Wheatley, *Leadership And The New Science: Learning About Organizations From an Orderly Universe*, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1992 p. 13.
6. "Statement of Traditional Dene Values and Principles", from *Dene Government Past Present and Future, the Dene Nation*, Yellowknife, N.T., 1984.
7. In aboriginal terms, community is defined as "an intimate relationship with all living things, both animate and inanimate." Most Western European cultures would have difficulty with this definition, especially with the concept of something "inanimate" being seen as "living". But the problem is merely one of the limitations of our English language. In aboriginal cultures the land is living.
8. Many aboriginal people use the ritual expression, "All my relations" to signify their links and accountability to their ancestors, elders and those who will come after them."
9. Capra, p 29.
10. Capra, *ibid*.
11. Wheatley, p. 106-107.
12. Hadas, Moses, *Essential Works of Stoicism*, Bantam Books, New York, 1960 (4.40).
13. David Bohm and Mark Edwards, *Changing Consciousness: Exploring The Hidden Sources of Social Political, and Environmental Crises Facing Our World*, Harper, San Francisco, 1991. See Chapter Five, "Dialogue and Collective Thought", p. 177-199.
14. Owen, Harrison, *Leadership Is*, Abbott Publishing, Potomac, 1990 p. 49-50.