Emergence

A lecture given in June 2000. I think it was at a conference on chaos theory in organisations. Chaos theory, complexity and self-organisation was the buzz set of theories at the time amongst organisation specialists, and intellectuals in general. Especially the idea of self-regulation was taken up by anyone who had an interest in how organisations evolve and develop. Thinking about it now, I feel sure it was a great boost to the Hayek school of economists who believed in the unregulated market as the best way for our world to be run. It was a position, of course, embraced by Thatcher and Reagan - but then Blair and Clinton continued the embrace and did nothing to undo the damage that we now have seen to follow.

I'm going to talk about what we used to call 'self-direction'.

I never liked the term self-direction very much. It sounds so individual - and that was certainly a part of it but that never took into account, in that term, the part in relation to others, the collective part. It's a very individualistic way of looking at it. It expressed the part of Humanistic Psychology that related to the lone cowboy in the Western.

That lone cowboy, of course, totally independent, totally capable, totally self-determining, makes a wonderful myth, but one that never solved anything outside of the story, and he surely never existed. So self-direction is a term that gave rise to some distortions and I'll touch on them, though it's not the central part of what I'm going to talk about.

I've been in on this self-direction thing since the beginning - or perhaps better said since its previous phase before this current one. That's to say I've been connected with it since the sixties. Then it was interrupted, in my view of things, at the end of the 70s, with the advent of Thatcherism. And possibly it is in another phase now, though not a very clear one - I shall be saying more about that.

But historically speaking, of course, self-direction has been going on in a way throughout the whole of evolution. And that illustrates one important way in which the term self-direction is inadequate - since to talk about the self, in the sense that we mean it today, in reference to early evolution is highly problematic. And yet the laws of evolution seem to be characterised by self-organisation. Somehow that term feels more acceptable.

The current phase is informed by chaos theory, complexity theory, strange attractors, ideas about self-organisation. And so I favour emergence, and that's what I've called this lecture. We emerged from chaos. An emergency seems to stimulate emergence. In a state of chaos we are, in a way, merged.

But to go back to the sixties, when chaos theory was hardly yet conceived and certainly not generally known. My first experience of self-direction was in the theatre. I worked with Keith Johnstone and Bill Gaskill. Keith wrote that wonderful book Impro - it's the best book I'm sure about theatre improvisation and a great read.

Theatre improvisation teaches us some things about self-direction and emergence - importantly about not-planning. Improvisation works best when you go out there and you don't know what you're going to do. Well, you know something about what you're going to do. So there we are right in the issue about structure. And therefore also right in the middle of the issue about leadership.

It's not that there is no structure, but it's a different level of structure. It's not that there's no leadership but a different kind, a very different kind, of leadership. And a

part of that difference, as I shall enlarge on later, is a flexibility about leadership, an ability to move into and out of it.

I'm going to ask you to do something in a short while, make this experiential, you know, in keeping with the style of self-direction and emergence, here I am giving a lecture about this stuff and we all know that this isn't quite right, it's not the done thing: or certainly it is paradoxical. So I'm going to ask you to do some things in a moment which will give some illustrations of what I'm saying and also, more importantly perhaps, give the opportunity, provide the structure, for some of the information, initiative, impulse, to come from you. But before we do that I'm going to go historical again, with a rather broad brush.

I've said that currently we are in a context of chaos theory, complexity theory, self-organisation. And I've placed my own early experiences of all this in the sixties. But we are part of a long tradition here. Certainly a long educational tradition. Montessori, Dewey, Piaget all focussed on 'maturation' as distinct from, and often opposed to, 'training'. Provide the right environment and the human organism will grow, learn, develop from its own impulse. Noam Chomsky's work on linguistics also illustrates this tradition. There is an inherent 'deep grammar' wired into the human brain which gives us the ability to create grammatically correct sentences, whichever language we grow up in; provided we do grow up in a language environment. We are not 'trained' to speak. The ability to speak is there in us, so long as speaking is part of what we experience. Reading and writing and 'rithmetic may be different - but not that different. Co-operation, social relating, responsibility, caring, self-reliance - none of these are just a matter of 'training'. Creative thinking likewise. Good management, entrepreneurial strategising, decision-making, communicating, likewise. Many skills, physical and emotional and mental, likewise. The laws of self-direction and emergence are relevant to all of them.

These are not new-fangled ideas. Their labelling as trendy left is an invention of the trendy right. Nor is there any lack of discipline here. We really mustn't let the forces of reaction take the high ground in the areas of morals or skills or discipline. We need to recognise, acknowledge, assert our own skills and disciplines, and the high degree of value-impulse that motivates us. I do not like an attitude, somewhat widespread though perhaps not more than thinly spread in the professional culture of most of us here, the attitude which pisses on the sixties. I am old enough to remember the fifties. That time was grey, thin-lipped, secretive, oppressive. Many things were the norm then which are almost unthinkable now, divorce contrivances, criminalising of homosexuality, the absence of civil rights for Blacks in America, also for Aborigines in Australia - in their early clips the Beatles, even the Stones, wore suits and ties, yes that's a frivolous example but think how awful it would be to go back to that time. Alright, I won't get further into that rant now!

Well, I promised you some experiences, so let's do that now.

OK. [this very simple exercise was basically: groups of 3 - turn to someone, don't plan who - be aware -- you don't know what will happen - don't plan - be inclined to say 'yes' to whatever initiative you are given - not more than 3 people together - if a 4th comes then one turns away - don't move the chairs --- an interval for processing, include considering constraints, perhaps repeat with this added possibility: you can change the constraints, but don't plan to do so --- processing suggested to include the beginnings of discussion of the boundaries of a chaotic situation]

I want to do some more lecturing.

After working at the Royal Court, which is where I met and worked with Keith Johnstone and Bill Gaskill and others, I got a job for a year directing in Coventry, at

the Belgrade Theatre. My boss was a man called Warren Jenkins. He was definitely a director of the old school. He told people, I mean the actors, what to do. This was confusing for me. At the Royal Court, the style of directing was to set up a situation, the environment of a scene within the context of the play, and then to let the actors find what to do. The word was 'find'.

At the Belgrade, Warren Jenkins' style, like that of most directors at that time, this was in the early sixties, his style was to decide what the play was, to assume this wisdom and to pass it on to the actors - even to the extent of demonstrating precise gestures and sentences, changing the position of a wrist, modulating the inflection of a voice. I saw him do this quite often.

It was a confusing time, and not just for me. Some actors wanted that, thrived on it. Some hated it, were deflated and disempowered by it. Some, most, needed a bit of it sometimes. Some needed a lot of it sometimes. You recognise that? I was learning about the need for flexibility.

Actually, the most interesting thing that happened to me in Coventry was I met some students at the Art School. They were doing a very free kind of improvisation, using their bodies and some materials and a very little speech, and they called this Dance. They called their group a Dance group. The two main inspirers, they certainly would not have let me call them leaders, were Ronnie Rees and Mike Baldwin. I asked them how they decided what to do. They said 'Oh, we never make any decisions'. They gave me a book to read, it was by Calvin Tomkins called 'Ahead Of The Game' and it was about John Cage, Marcel Duchamp, Robert Rauschenberg and Jean Tinguely and about the 'Happenings' movement, in New York mainly. I stayed up a whole night reading this book, I was totally absorbed and often laughing, some of what they got up to was very funny, and it changed my life at that time.

When I left Coventry and came back to London I started, and ran, a happenings group. It was made up of sculptors and painters and actors, also a sociologist - most of them post-graduate students at Goldsmith's College, where I was fortunate enough to become a part-time tutor on the art-teacher's certificate course. We met twice a week. Once was for exercises, which I usually ran, and once for an event. This event would be governed by a form of script we called a notation, and was devised and run by one or sometimes two of any of us. Some of these were private, some were public and therefore to a greater or lesser extent performances. I learned a lot then, about structure. It was a fun time. It lasted about eighteen months and it ended, gradually and organically, mainly because I found I got more and more interested in the real interactions between the members of that group. And at the time I didn't seem to be able to integrate it with the performance - though I know other such groups were able to.

And that's how I came to join the Poly, the Polytechnic of North London as it was at the time, the Organisational Change Unit of the Management Studies department.

Now I want to talk about the T-group. (The T just stands for training).

The T-group was fashionable then as a learning tool; and I thought of it then as a kind of prototype of the self-directed learning group. It was described as non-directive, and one thing this entailed was that the trainer, so-called at the time, said rather little and was supposed to make process interventions and not take any leadership role in the content of what the group was doing.

It was a great training for the trainer! You really learned how to handle silence, and the hostility, and the projections. You learned how not to be nice or understanding. You learned, too, what interventions worked and what didn't, you certainly knew

which it was. And you learned intervention strategy, that you had to strategise, to make your own internal decisions, and therefore you learned about immediate design, and therefore also about planned design. And of course you discovered that this certainly was not a non-directive group, that you were constantly reinforcing your position as leader by not leading!

Now this was all very well for commercial organisations at that time, and for the civil service, where hierarchies were desired and established and where managers were required to manage and to learn how to take initiatives and communicate and so on within this context. But we had political pretensions. We thought we could contribute to changing the world. We were connected with the Growth Movement. I and two other members of the Poly staff, plus a fourth 'trainer' who frequently worked with us, were actually asked to design and run the first meeting of the AHP (Association of Humanistic Psychology) in London (so probably in the UK). John Southgate, who was a leading light of this unit, was politically active, a member of the SWP (Socialist Workers Party - a Trotskyist organisation of the time). And anyway, the world was changing. The old methods no longer worked. Even the T-group was shot through with old-method orientation. We were influenced by Roger Harrison, a progressive, trendy organisation trainer from the USA, by Charles Handy, at a bit of a distance because he was English perhaps, and especially by the Danes, by Gunnar Hjelholdt and his minisociety model, and Ulla Ehrensjöld, who ran a lab with us and got into a deep dispute with John Southgate, confronting him as being, covertly or perhaps unawarely, oppressive, which no doubt he was!

So the way we worked changed. We began to work much more flexibly, moving into a semi-participant role at times, into a leadership role when it seemed needed. We might suggest structures and exercises. We would go along with a group's mode of interaction, its defences and habitual patterns to some extent: before openly perhaps even judging (yes, judging!), rather than pretending just to comment. We became much more spontaneous, bringing our real selves into the group. But we retained within ourselves the responsibility for deciding whether this was strategic or not - that's to say, whether it 'worked' in developing the group and its members' communication and awareness and skills.

We let small groups, within the context of a larger course, work on their own, trusting them to do valuable work without a 'trainer'. We retained our monitoring responsibility through the plenary, through task and skills groups, through being available in a consultant role and occasionally through confronting a group uninvited.

None of this was ever easy or flabby. With our flexibility went a considerable toughness, a lot of thought and a lot of discipline.

And what we learned from all this was that the participants learned how to co-operate; as well as how to be self-reliant: as individuals and in groupings. They learned to take initiatives. They learned to plan together. They learned how to organise the resources available to them. They learned how to be critical. I mean by this that they learned how to support other people's initiatives as well, but no longer did they just accept what they were told or let themselves be pathologised if they didn't.

In the old T-group the stages were 'membership', 'conflict' and 'intimacy', and intimacy was a sort of sentimental personal interaction. No integrated personal/ organisational/ political development happened. In a large organisational group with co-operative planning, it did happen. A huge advance.

People learned collective responsibility.

Also, and clearly this is of significance, we changed the clientele of the unit. Previously we had clients who were companies, and public sector organisations with a company-like structure, they sent their people. Now we set up a 2-year, part-time Diploma course working with individuals - yes, some of them came from similar companies, some came from social work, nursing or educational organisations, and some came as individuals, often with the aim of becoming group-workers or leaders of one kind or another themselves.

And of course there was the real world. This was not a true peer group, not a true collective. We were staff, they were students. We were permanent, they temporary. We were paid, they were paying. And all was within the framework of an institution, which then assessed them, with us being part of the assessment process. Real peer-groups are rare. Do any of you know any? Have you been in one? What is their structure? Even peer-supervision, peer-assessment is rare.

The assessment process was taken a step further when I worked at South West London College on the Counselling Skills courses, with Brigid Procter as chief. This chiefdom was not an easy matter, I mean it was OK for us on the staff but it was heavy duty for Brigid, who occupied that link position on the boundary with the outside world. There was also a heavy duty for the students - they had to assess each other. I had my doubts about this. It was not clear to me that learning how to assess your fellow student is going to make you a better counsellor. (I have written about this issue - see Self & Society Vol XII No 4 July/August 1984) It may well make you better at other things, I am sure it does, and some of these are surely related to counselling. But whatever things it may make you better at they are highly charged nonetheless and require, I believe, a good deal of emotional and political work. I use the term political here in the broad sense, the sense of learning how to live and work with others, which these structures I believe do address.

But I want to say right now that this process of peer-assessment takes us right to the heart of one of the cathexes of conflict in the phenomenon of emergence. I mean evaluation* - in other words, the criteria by which one makes judgements, the need the world has for criteria because that's how emergence crystallises out. We judge; I judge; you judge: but we are also a part of the process.

Structure is another cathexis. The students in the dance group in Coventry refused to admit that they had any criteria or any structure, but obviously they had - some things 'worked', others didn't. And the way they set things up, the way all of us set things up, it makes a difference, we often do not know how to set or even to recognise the limits of strange attractors but we have to work with the intention to predict, or influence, or manifest, or ride, or express in our being, those limits.

That is what human responsibility is about and that is what membership and leadership by each and every one of us in the new millennium is about.

Tom Osborn

*In current discourse (note written in 2011 - Thom) it is **the market** which is judged necessary for arriving at 'best value'. I believe that inherent in the structures of collective responsibility and collaboration another way can be developed, of which empathetic communication and peer-assessment are essential parts.*