
RE-IMAGINING ORGANIZATIONS THAT WORK WITH AND SUPPORT COMMUNITIES

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WE KNOW, OR AT LEAST I THINK WE KNOW, THAT WE ARE LIVING IN A TIME OF radical change in our natural environments, our resources, our economies, our demographics, our social values, even our fundamental frames of seeing the world around us. The late Thomas Berry often said that we, we humans, need a new story, a radically new story about ourselves, about our relationships to the earth and to each other, and about our great work as individuals and as a species. We do not know, cannot know, what our world, locally or globally, might be like twenty years out. All we can know is that it will be different. We can also be sure that the fundamental story we tell of nonprofit organizations twenty years from now will be radically different from the current story we tell now, which, in my analysis, is long dead anyway, overtaken by the change forces of the past two decades.

As people who lead, work, and volunteer in nonprofit organizations, in organizations that work with and support communities, what might be our stance in the face of these unknowns?

Looking out into the twenty-year horizon, I suggest that our only stance is to play the unruly Fool, to openly speak the truth as we experience and see it to those around us. These truths will be more immediate, concrete, and pragmatic, as in these people are hurting, or this issue needs to be faced, or this works for now. Truth here will be less analytical, theoretical, or ideological, as such truths are based on our current stories or frames of reference., and these are unlikely to hold relevance twenty years out, when our grandchildren will be entering a different workforce, and when we, many of us, will be far into retirement and approaching our own passing.

Imagine an Executive Director wearing a fluorescent orange wig all weekend, at an open creativity workshop with her Board members and staff, held in the rehearsal spaces and lobbies of a community theatre. There are creativity tools all over the place. This is a start at being a Fool, both for her and for everyone else in her organization.

It is tough. We do not hire Executive Directors to play the Fool who, like the trickster coyote, lives in between, tells stories, and laughs out loud at the rest of us. We hire Executive Directors to manage risks, and preserve and grow our organizations, for we think our organizations are essential. We recruit Board members with the same thoughts in mind. The Fool always asks: "Is our organization essential; does it really need to be preserved; and, at what cost?"

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If a twenty-year horizon is too far out for our re-imagining, what about right now?

Over the past two decades, many of our nonprofit organizations, particularly those in community services, have become embedded in ever more complex and somewhat integrated public service systems, where outcomes and revenues are determined by public contractors, relationships with staff reflect collective agreements, attention is focused on services and products and not on community development or advocacy, reporting is based on quantitative rationalization, voluntarism has lessened or died, and managers, Boards, and members have less direct power. This is, perhaps, overstating our current reality, but I do not think that I am far off the mark.

The embedding has largely worked for us. Our organizations have continued to thrive and deliver important services. Some would argue, with cogent reason, that we have compromised our missions, on behalf of survival. But this world is dying. The current economic crisis, and let us not delude ourselves that it is simply a short term blip in the ever onwards movement of free market capitalist societies, is forcing governments to cut deeply, to face the reality that they have been funding services at levels that were not affordable then, and are certainly not affordable now. Governments are also pulling back from contracting with nonprofit organizations, preferring to use their own public infrastructures such as schools and health centres to deliver services in the names of efficiency and rationalization. At the same time, our own costs are rising.

This picture may seem bleak. It is. Many, smaller nonprofit organizations in many different fields of endeavour, organizations that now work with and support communities here and around the world, will likely die. Their services may end, but more likely will be taken on by others, because for the public funders, it is the services that are important or essential, not the organizations that provide them.

Playing the Fool is not a useful response here, but neither is putting our head under our individual or collective pillows. The appropriate image, perhaps, is one of being awakened, fired up, fierce, dragon-like. We need to take bigger risks, risking our reserves, risking our ideas, risking our organizations, investing in the new possibilities put forward by others, often by younger people. We need to cut our activities and expenditures, and release our resources in ways that will allow us to re-imagine who we are and what we might become. Right now, in most nonprofit organizations, all of the resources are tied up in current business. If we stay this way, we will die, or at least, become ever more irrelevant.

Imagine the same Executive Director. It is November, 2009. Her first cut at next year's budget shows a deficit of \$80,000, which will expand to at least \$100,000 in a further year. A major funder has decided to pull back two contracted services and deliver them directly. Costs are rising, particularly facility costs. Counterparts of the same funder have decided to regionalize a third contracted service. Loss of all three contracts would mean loss of key infrastructures, supports for fixed overheads, key staff, and a pool of dynamic young volunteers.

What does this Executive Director do now? She gathers information from as many sources as she can. She listens to her counterparts elsewhere in the province. She talks to a senior

consultant and her management team. She keeps her Board well informed. Then, she acts swiftly, asking for a meeting with the local contract manager to provide her with all of the key information to make a wiser decision about the third contract. The meeting is constructive and leads to a meeting with a more senior manager. Later, she proposes to her Board that they run a planned deficit for the next year of some \$35,000, giving the organization resources and breathing space to move forward and innovate. But, will this be enough? The Executive Director is satisfied that she has done what she needed to do. She cannot be attached to the outcome.

As we enter this wild and unruly journey of re-imagination, as we begin to design and craft organizations that will be relevant ten years out, we also need to carefully analyze our experiences of the past two decades, identifying those issues that could well rock our organizational boats over the next decade. In a background paper for a dialogue this past June at Concordia University, I suggested the following ideas and questions, contradictions, for pause and reflection.

- Increased reporting requirements by all funders focused on outcomes measurements, and based on assumptions of scientific rationality, linear cause and effect, and scarcity of power and resources – where we know that these assumptions do not fit the communities we live in nor the types of work we engage in, and that these reporting requirements are becoming ever more costly of our time, money, and spirit.
- Larger and ever more complex nonprofit organizations with thick cultures that almost act as immune systems, operating in more turbulent and competitive environments, and with increasing governance, leadership, management, and administrative demands – where we know that up and coming, often younger, leaders are likely to struggle to swim in this crazy nonprofit management world that we have created ourselves.
- Nonprofit organizations that are more and more centred on delivering known services and products to known markets, and less and less engaged with more unruly activities such as citizenship, advocacy, and innovation – where we know that our missions and our commitments to social change and social justice call us to different paths.
- Nonprofit organizations that are more and more influenced and driven by the industry they are in, and by decisions made at broader service system levels, resulting in our organizations becoming more homogenous, and our Boards, managers, staff, and members having less power and influence – where we know that people come to our presumed unique organizations to make a real difference in people's lives, in local communities.
- No or few resources for people, younger or not, to create new nonprofit organizations, different ways of being organized to achieve community development, social action, and justice – where we know that our and others' established organizations are inherently resistant to change, and that creating new organizations may be our best hope for organizational transformation.

- Aging Board members, volunteers, and managers who may want to remain engaged, but also want to recruit new and different people – where we know that we do not necessarily have the knowledge and experience to reach out to these people and to make the changes in our organizations required to allow them to feel at home and truly engaged.
- Legal structures and regulatory frameworks for nonprofit organizations that derive from traditional understandings of what nonprofit and charitable mean in Canadian history and society – where we know that our society has changed and will continue to change radically, and that these legal structures may be getting in the way rather than enabling new approaches to emerge.

Imagine again the same Executive Director. She arranges a weekend workshop with her Board and management team, and invites three outsiders, a local social planner, an Executive Director of a successful and entrepreneurial organization elsewhere, and a private funder. Together, with the help of a consultant, they identify issues likely to affect the organization over the next decade. The Board decides to use the list as a constant lens for viewing all current major decisions.

The immediate horizon, the ten year horizon, and the twenty year horizon all call out for our attention.

We need to let go of our common hidden assumptions, that our nonprofit organization is essential, even simply important, that our community will notice our passing after we have gone, that only we know and care, that only we have the truth, that our world is based on scarcity. We need to let go of our relationships with government and stop pretending that the answer lies in a new relationship. We need to strike out on a new path, even if this means being lost for some time, and even if it means our organization is not around for the future. What this path looks like can only be determined by each individual nonprofit organization. My own sense is that the path has much to do with seeing the world in terms of abundance, impermanence, passion, balance, and unruliness.

The changes around us are inevitable, essential if the planet is to survive, if we are to survive as a people. The question is what this means for our nonprofit organizations, no matter what field of endeavour they may be in. What I have tried to suggest here is that there are three different stances. Further out, we should consider the Fool. Tomorrow, we need to act swiftly and decisively, and take risks, on the basis of the best information we can gather. In between, 5-10 years out, we need to reflect deeply on the paradoxes we live with, using these reflections as a guide for our actions.