

ORGANIZATION UNBOUND
The Spiritual Architecture of Organizations

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I. Introduction

There is no outside, no inclosing wall, no circumference to us.

- Emerson

Invoking Jim

My father-in-law, Jim, is a great destroyer of walls. Every house he has lived in will bear me out. Each is filled with reclaimed open space, the air laced with the cheerful scars of what has been removed. To create such space, a man needs to have a strong desire to see the world – the whole thing – from the chair where he sits.

He also needs a hammer.

Once, eating breakfast in his underwear, it occurred to Jim that the wall between the kitchen and the dining room was an extravagance. He put down his spoon, took a hammer from a drawer, and swung without comment, tearing off random patterns of sheetrock. He didn't take the entire wall down – he had the weekend for that – just marked it enough to remind everyone that here was where a wall ought not to be. The children ate their cereal, unappalled.

Jim uses a gentler hammer with people. He is drawn to searching for connections where the rest of us see only boundaries. A difficult family member or guest makes him curious, not anxious. And his conversations with even the most strident or hostile people are unguarded. To talk with Jim is to wander. And in the wandering he will find and gather things that you do not. He will find them because he looks for them. And he will gather them because he wears the right boots.

Perhaps Jim is like this because he is a landscape architect. He is used to a certain way of walking and a certain way of seeing, after all. He is highly trained. But it might also be a matter of faith. Maybe Jim is simply the kind of man who never sees a wall that he believes in or a field that he doesn't.



The Sociology of the Possible

This paper is about organizational boundaries, the seemingly sensible divisions we make between one thing and another, or one person and another, as we pursue our organizational aims. We rely on boundaries for structure and coherence. We rely on them for meaning. The boundary seems to be the basic geometrical ground of organization, the structural dynamic that allows any organization to exist in the first place. I will explore the consequences of this geometry in terms of its confounding effect on human engagement. And I will consider the possibility that there is another kind of geometry, an unbound geometry that nurtures the human spirit while maintaining a profound and useful organizing power of its own.

This paper is also about organizational faith. The theologian Paul Tillich describes faith as the “dynamics of ultimate concern” (1957). He sees faith not as a particular set of beliefs but as a stance toward the world, a determination to engage with the things that matter most however one names those things or wherever one finds them. Faith, in this sense, *is* engagement. And there is a long-echoing complaint in the literature of industrial critique that it is precisely this kind of engagement that organizations lack. We do not find organizational life deeply engaging, because organizational spaces are not built in such a way as to connect us with what we most care about. If this complaint is true, and I think it is, it is a particularly troubling one in an age that relies on organizations to frame, provoke, and embody larger patterns of social and institutional change. If something in an organization’s DNA prevents it from pursuing ultimate meanings, we are unlikely to see such meanings blossom in the broader social world. At times, then, (especially in the latter part of the paper) my arguments will seem targeted toward social change organizations – those organizations that concern themselves explicitly with social meanings. But ultimately I think every organization is a social change organization. Every organization creates or recreates the relationship patterns that thicken into cultures and institutions – the patterns that we have come to think of as society.

Three questions, then, are at the heart of this paper:

1. What can we say about the fundamental dynamics of human engagement?
2. What are the conditions that allow such engagement to flourish in organizational settings?
3. What is the relationship between organizational engagement and broader patterns of social purpose or meaning?

I will argue that the answers to these questions have everything to do with the ways in which we create, maintain, and rely upon boundaries as the structural and ideological ground of organizational life.

This is largely a theoretical paper. Much of its framework will be presented deductively. But I confess that I originally arrived at many of these ideas inductively by working in the field with a small number of extraordinary organizations. I will draw upon two of these organizations in particular. They will serve as examples, helping to clarify the themes I explore. They will also, I hope, infuse the paper with a sense of possibility – even plausibility – that is at least somewhat earned. Ultimately, I am less concerned with describing how the world works than with describing how the world *could* work given who we are and what we know about the nature of social structuring. The sociology at work here is not the sociology of the given, but the sociology of the possible. The organizations that have helped form the ideas in this paper are organizations that teach us what we might be.

Engagement

I realize that I have not yet said exactly what I mean by the word ‘engagement.’ I am using the term phenomenologically to describe an experience or perceived state of being. To engage is to connect. We are always connected to something, of course – people or

places or ideas or feelings of some sort – but colloquially, when we say we feel engaged, we mean that we are connected in a relatively deep and ultimately positive way to what we are experiencing. We feel present. We feel interested. We feel part of. So let's say that the first level or dimension of engagement is simply this feeling.

To anyone interested in this sort of experience, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi will immediately spring to mind. Csikszentmihalyi has researched something that seems to be just what I am describing. His interest is in what he calls “flow” or “the psychology of optimal experience” (1990). Flow is primarily concerned with task engagement (though Csikszentmihalyi does describe cases in which people can be in flow simply by being). Flow is associated with a profound connection to the task or to current experience, and it generally involves a sense of concentration, alertness, satisfaction and, creativity with a loss or diminishment of the sense of time passing. While flow is certainly a kind of engagement, the following rather curious result of Csikszentmihalyi's research suggests that there may be more to engagement than simply being in flow.

Csikszentmihalyi's research involved exploring the nature of “positive experiences” in a variety of settings. One common factor in flow experiences is that they involve clear and focused goals. They also involve highly challenging tasks that are matched by the skill set of the person performing the task. Unsurprisingly, then, the majority of the positive or even peak experiences people described took place at work (Csikszentmihalyi and LeFevre 1989). Work after all is where we typically encounter focused, challenging activities that match our skills. In contrast, people generally described their experiences during leisure time negatively. Their overall sense of happiness tended to be much lower during free time. What's curious is that despite these clear experiential descriptions, people generally indicated that they would rather be at leisure than at work.

Csikszentmihalyi interprets this paradox to mean that people are culturally influenced not to “heed the evidence of their senses.” That is, people pay less attention to what they actually enjoy than to what they are supposed to enjoy: in this case, leisure. There may be some truth to this interpretation. But what if people are more perceptive than Csikszentmihalyi gives them credit for? Perhaps there is something inherently unfulfilling about the way we've come to define work, no matter how pleasurable or positive it might feel at the emotional level. And perhaps there is something inherently more meaningful in the spaces we create via “leisure,” no matter how challenging such spaces feel or how much anxiety they provoke. If what we are after is not a temporary feeling of enjoyment but a sustained connection to essential things, then there may be more to deep engagement than the pursuit of flow. And organizations as they are generally configured may preclude this sort engagement. A quick glance at the last two or three hundred years of critiques aimed at industrial organization will bear this out.

Critiques Related to Disengagement

The industrial revolution propelled us into an organizational age. Organizations are now the dominant institutional form we confront and the dominant instrument of institutional reproduction and change (Mintzberg 1989; Scott 1998; Weeks and Galunic 2003). Since

industrialization, however, a persistent chorus of voices – artistic, philosophical, sociological, political, economic– has expressed a fundamental discomfort with the nature of industrial organization. Most of these critiques are well known. They represent a wildly diverse set of scientific, cultural, social, and metaphysical perspectives on the world. But despite this heterogeneity, a simple common thread runs through them: that we have become alienated – divided from important things – and are the worse for it. Since ‘alienation’ is an overburdened word, let’s call this general theme ‘disengagement’.

One version of this theme is that we have become disengaged from *ourselves*. Critics of capitalism industrial organization have been much concerned with the dehumanization and loss of autonomy experienced by the majority of workers. Taylor (1989) frames this as “the conflict between disengaged instrumentalism and the Romantic or modern protest against it.” A central theme in Marx (1978), for example, is that labor - the productive, creative capacity in each of us - has come to be seen as something external to us, an alien object that can be bought and sold. Such alienation deprives us of agency and also of the kind of interior space we need to lead meaningful lives. Marx, of course, associates this loss with the working classes. Some strands of critical organization theory (e.g., Perrow 1986) share his emphasis, assuming that agency still largely resides in upper management and ownership and that people in those classes are not deprived of dimensions of interiority in the way that the lower classes are. The earliest critiques of capitalism associated worker disengagement with job specialization and with hierarchical power relationships via the wage system (Dolan 1971), two foundational elements of industrial organization. Modern organizational scholars and sociologists have continued to explore this theme, notably in the 1950’s and 1960’s, and have found a correlation between this type of disengagement and degrees of centralization and formalization (Aiken and Hage 1966).

More multi-hued critiques suggest that the disconnection from the self is not just a problem for workers but for everyone participating in industrialized life. Nineteenth century romantic poets and philosophers in England and Germany developed the concept of self-expression, the unique and subjective flowering of inner exploration, as a central personal, social, and spiritual good. They saw modern economic organization as antithetical to such expression (Abrams 1953). The lack of self-expression available to us in organizational space is a common complaint among modern critics as well (e.g., Hochschild 1983; Whyte 1994), many of whom make no distinction between management and labor in terms of this lack. Such critiques focus on the loss of various parts or dimensions of the self. People in industrial organizations are seen as having given up access to crucial energies, emotions, interests, talents, yearnings, and intuitions. Words like ‘wholeness’, ‘integration’, and ‘authenticity’ are the tonic notes for such critics. And to live in the role-rigid social and organizational spaces we have created is to live lives that are inauthentic and less than fully human (Taylor 1991).

A second major version of the theme of disengagement focuses not on the self but on the external world, suggesting that we have become disconnected from each other and from our natural environment. Nineteenth century Romantics decried the loss of traditional community ties and of the soul’s natural reverence toward and communion with nature.

The former complaint was mirrored in many community-based and religious movements; the latter was taken up in the early twentieth century by the burgeoning conservation movement, which would later become the environmental movement (Hawken 2007). Today, the dominant new social movements focused on corporatism, globalization, and the environment (Crossley 2003) all explore this same sort of external disengagement. Large organizations are seen as exploiting workers and communities (Mander and Goldsmith 1996; Klein 2000; Shiva 2005) as well as ecosystems (Daly, Cobb et al. 1989; Hawken 1994; Daly 1996; Hawken, Lovins et al. 1999), largely due to the fact that the people making decisions are disconnected from the impacts of those decisions. Framing these arguments is a meta-critique associating disengagement with an inability to sustain healthy democracies (Marcuse 1964; Taylor 1991; Korten 1995; Saul 1995).

Disengagement from the self and disengagement from the world are not unconnected problems. One way they can be linked is through the concept of moral agency. Taylor (1989) sees the self as essentially the quest to discover a location in moral space. That is, the self is defined by its evaluative relationship with the good. This relationship does not have to be closed, ideological, or even conscious. It can be exploratory and tacit, but to be a self is to be involved in a narrative that is ordered by some qualitative idea of what is good, right, worthy, etc. Srinivas (1999) argues that organizations deprive workers (managers, in this case) of their empathic humanness – a dynamic he calls “androidization” – leaving them morally indifferent, incapable of exercising moral agency. Inward disengagement leads to outward disengagement.

This dynamic is illustrated in the following Paul Hawken anecdote (Korten 1999). Hawken is a well-known entrepreneur, activist, and writer who focuses on corporate sustainability issues. He describes a consulting session facilitated by a friend of his in which engineers for a large chemical company were asked to break into teams to design a spaceship capable of leaving the earth for 100 years and returning with all of its inhabitants thriving. The teams’ focus was to be on the physical and social systems within the spaceship, not on the mechanics of the ship itself. The teams presented their work to each other and voted on the winning design. The winning spaceship/ecosystem had many interesting features, but perhaps the most striking thing about it was that the kinds of products that this chemical company produced were not allowed on the ship. Things like herbicides and pesticides were rejected out of hand by the chemical engineers who spent their lives manufacturing them, since a healthy ecosystem on the ship would need weeds and bugs and might not be able to metabolize such chemicals anyway. Despite this result, I imagine we can safely assume that the engineers went back to work the next day (as most of us would) and continued to build their elegant but potentially catastrophic compounds. Here, self-fragmentation is evident – the habit of divorcing various parts of ourselves from each other so that in our daily lives we do not have to confront anything resembling an “ultimate concern.” Here we are faithless.

And in fact, Tillich, the theologian who has framed faith as the dynamics of ultimate concern, explicitly sets his idea of faith against any type of personal fragmentation.

Faith as ultimate concern is an act of the total personality. It happens in the center of the personal life and includes all its elements. Faith is the most centered act of the human mind. It is not a movement of a special section or a special function of man's total being (1957: 4).

When a chorus of voices includes Marxists, theologians, organization theorists, poets, and environmentalists, I find myself paying attention. This chorus tells us that our organizing patterns constrain our ability to engage with ourselves and with each other, leaving us disconnected from the things that are most important in life. What are those things? Specifically, each critic might offer a different answer, but in that they are all focused on engagement, we might say that *engagement* itself is of ultimate concern. They all implicitly associate their versions of ultimate good with full connection to the self and/or complete connection to each other (the natural world being included in that “other”). This idea might seem tautological at first, a way of saying that connection to ourselves and to each other is important so that we can be in touch with what matters most and what matters most is connection to ourselves and to each other. But I think this tautology is, in fact, revealing, as we shall see by exploring these ideas from a more directly spiritual perspective.

Two Spiritual Themes

Mitroff and Denton's research on spirituality in the workplace (Mitroff and Denton 1999; Mitroff and Denton 1999; Mitroff 2003) involved surveys and interviews of some 200 North American business executives. The most surprising thing about their research is that the interviewees described spirituality in strikingly similar ways. The authors admit that they had expected to find divergent interpretations of the meaning and importance of spirituality, but this wasn't the case. Certain themes turned out to be almost universal. And at the core of this shared version of spirituality were two deceptively gentle ideas that, when pushed a bit, actually become quite dizzying in their absoluteness. In the context of our disengagement discussion, however, they will sound familiar.

The first of these ideas is that spirituality involves the whole person. Almost all respondents felt that spirituality was not a particular function or part of the personality but an integrating force that drew on all aspects of the self. Respondents believed that spirituality at work required the kind of workspaces that allowed all dimensions of the self (rational, emotional, intuitive, pragmatic, humorous, etc.) and all skills and interests to emerge when appropriate. To be spiritual in this sense means to be completely *intraconnected*, to be in communion with all parts of one's being. I'll call this quality 'fullness' in that it has to do with access to the fullness of the self.

The second idea has to do with the belief that spirituality involves a feeling of connectedness to the whole of life, to everyone and everything participating in existence. To be spiritual here means to be *interconnected*, not provisionally, but entirely. And not functionally, but essentially. In fact the deepest expression of this theme involves more than simply being connected to the whole. It involves seeing the whole in oneself and oneself in the whole. I'll call this theme 'oneness'.

There is a burgeoning interest in spirituality in the organizational studies literature (Garcia-Zamor 2003) and in trying to understand its place in a scholarship tradition that has traditionally been largely focused on organizational effectiveness rather than on more transcendent goals (Benefiel 2003). Other studies of spirituality and the workplace reinforce Mitroff and Denton's findings on what I'm calling fullness and oneness (King and Nicol 1999; Primeaux and Vega 2002; Gull and Doh 2004). The parallels between fullness and oneness and the industrial organizational critique that I've outlined are obvious. But these interview responses are not simply reflections of our particular culture in our lurching, industrial age. Something like fullness and oneness can be found at the core of virtually every major spiritual tradition. In the major institutionalized religions, fullness and oneness are implied if not explicit. Huston Smith (1991) points out that what links the seemingly divergent views on the nature of reality in Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as well as the in the "primal religions," is a common emphasis on the complete integration of all things and on the "sheer immensity of the human self." The mystical branches of these and other traditions go even further, making startlingly similar assertions about the essential unity of reality and claiming that the whole of this reality can be found inside of the self, precisely because the small, isolated self is, in fact, an illusion (Happold 1964; Underhill 1990).

Radical Engagement

My argument then is that social critiques based on some version of inner and/or outer disengagement offer an implicit vision of total engagement as a central human aspiration or good and that this vision mirrors the emphasis on fullness and oneness at the heart of both traditional and contemporary understandings of spirituality.

Lest I be accused of sleight-of-hand in putting social critics – many of whom are decidedly a-spiritual – and spiritual traditions awkwardly together in a makeshift room of my own, let me say more about what I mean by spirituality for the purposes of this paper. I believe that the theme of disengagement can only be understood as a spiritual theme, but I mean this in the broadest, least controversial way. Disengagement is a state in which we have lost touch with what is central to us, with what it means to be human. The spirit in question is the human spirit, and when we fail to feed it we naturally become dis-spirited. Whether one defines this experience biologically, psychologically, socially, or metaphysically is unimportant from this perspective. That there is something essential at the core of human experience need not provoke metaphysical debate.¹ What is striking to me is that while the spiritual "content" varies among the streams of thought I have mentioned, the spiritual dynamic of engagement is very similar. There are certainly other perspectives in the world based not on engagement but on competition and survival. But social critics (generally concerned with power, justice, freedom, etc.) tend not to rely on these perspectives, since they would leave them nothing to critique. If competition and survival are at the root of our experience, from what stance can we claim that a particular

¹ I recognize that some would argue that there is no such "essence" or "core." This paper will probably be of little interest to them except perhaps as a lively irritant. I am content with Taylor's above-mentioned argument that it is impossible to order oneself as a 'self' without some implicit values-based dimension.

arrangement of winners or survivors is the wrong one? – perhaps a functional stance focused on the overall survival of the species or planet, but most critics go much farther and are much more normative than this. So I think my claim of a shared vision among social critics and spiritual traditions is generally supportable if not impregnable.

What I want to emphasize again is the absoluteness of this vision: the call for engagement with all parts of the self and with everything and everyone. Literatures that seem to offer insight into engagement – whether they focus on job satisfaction (Glisson and Durick 1988), organizational commitment (Mathieu and Zajac 1990; Swailes 2002), organizational creativity (Drazin, Glynn et al. 1999), or the psychology of community (Chavis, Hogge et al. 1986) – are almost always provisional. They are concerned with narrowly operationalized types of engagement in limited contexts (i.e., to particular organizations, activities, or groups of people). If what we seek, however, is the totalizing set of connections described above, then these provisional engagements will leave us ultimately unfulfilled. If the critics (implicitly) and the mystics (explicitly) are right, then what we long for is *radical* engagement: total engagement, at the root level, with everything. Note that this does not imply that one can *achieve* such a totalizing engagement. Only the mystics claim to have done that. The rest of us are a bit raggedy for such heroism. But our inability to actualize the ideal does not mean that its pursuit can't guide our relationships. I will quote Emerson (19xx) again: “Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth . . .” We can be satisfied in the apprenticeship, in the seeking.

So there you have the postulate upon which this paper rests: that fullness and oneness are what we seek and that when we are cut off from this seeking we become dispirited. The implications of this idea for organizational life are profound. In the next section, I'll explore these implications from the perspective of the literatures on identity and organizational structure. I will argue that the fundamental social-psychological and structural mechanisms we use to organize ourselves are inalterably opposed to fullness and oneness. Until we recognize this contradiction, I believe most of our attempts to create engaging, inspiring organizations will fail, though they may appear to succeed for a time. I then develop an organizational approach – a spiritual architecture, if you will – that at least attempts to make room for the pursuit of radical engagement. I hope, by the end, it will seem plausible that this architecture is not only engaging but also fruitful. It may offer us not just a more fulfilling experience of organizational life but a more effective and meaningful result: a way to build the things we need to build and tackle the social problems we need to tackle in newly energetic and creative ways.

II. Structure Unbound

What is structure? It is a relatively persistent pattern of relationships among the elements that make up a given system. Structure implies some sort of perceptible regularity to these relationships, whether the “elements” we are talking about are the numbers in a mathematical sequence, the rooms in a house, or the people in an organization. Structured relationships repeat themselves over time and/or across space. This repetition is what makes them patterns. The “rule” connecting the various elements might be hard to grasp. The pattern might not be obvious at first. But to speak of a structure is to speak of its underlying relational rules: “ $2(n-1)$,” “the walls are at right angles to the floors and ceilings,” “the marketing department takes its direction from the vice-president for corporate strategy,” etc.

The Geometry of the Boundary

Roles and Groups as Boundaries

Organizational structure, then, is a persistent pattern of relationships or interactions among members of the organization. Scholars who study organizational structure generally focus on patterns related to authority and decision-making, communication, and behavior (Donaldson 1996). Ranson, Hinings et al. (1980) contrast two streams of literature, one that focuses on formal structures and is in the Weberian tradition (“framework”), and another that focuses on emergent, informal structures and is associated with early organizational theorists like Merton, Selznick, Gouldner, and Blau (“interaction”). They argue that the division between framework and interaction is artificial, and they draw on Giddens and Bourdieu to show that the two types of structure are mutually constitutive. And indeed, research emphasizing the structuring role played by belief systems, frames, logics, meanings, etc. is burgeoning (Lounsbury and Ventresca 2003).

The literature contains a dizzying array of approaches, few definitions, and multiple levels of analysis. Forgive me if I forgo the speed-bump of a complete literature review, but I want to get straight to the point. Despite the seeming multiplicity of structural dimensions and dynamics at work in organizations, all of them, insofar as they are social, are invoked through the two most basic social-structural constituents, the role and the group. This may sound reductive, but it is hard to come up with a counter-example if we think about structure as it is portrayed in the organizational literature. A role is a set of functional parameters describing what one does, with whom one communicates, and the decision-making scope one has. A group is a set of associational parameters describing to whom one belongs.

Formal organizational charts are clearly built around roles and groups, but all of the structuring elements generally cited, whether formal or informal, express and maintain themselves through roles and groups. A routine, for example, can only exist as an element of social structure if it is embedded in a specific role or seen as an overall identity commitment by a group. If a certain behavior – say, taking out the trash – happens regularly (i.e., structurally), it happens either because certain people are

expected to do it (it is part of their role) or because it is seen as a requisite for belonging to the group and therefore everyone does it. Authority is similarly assigned and executed through role and group patterns, as is information flow. Cultures and belief systems, which are also structural mechanisms, may or may not involve elaborate role differentiation, but strong group identification (at least in terms of “believers” and “non-believers”) is often, if not always, a result of a shared belief that is held firmly enough to have a structuring effect on interaction.

Before exploring the relationship between role-group structures and radical engagement, it is important to understand that roles and groups are implicit limits or boundaries. Boundary building and maintenance is generally seen as a foundational social process for establishing structured modes of relationship (Lamont and Molnar 2002), and organizations are highly territorial contexts, both formally and psychologically (Brown, Lawrence et al. 2005). A role might tell us what we will do, but it seals us off from other possibilities. It hints at a cavernous space filled by all of the things we will not do. Similarly, a group might seem to be a friendly collection of souls with similar skills, goals, or interests. But more powerfully, a group is a relational territory, and when such territories solidify, members of the group find it increasingly difficult to connect to people inhabiting “foreign” groups. From this perspective, then, organizational structure invokes a limiting set of intra-connections (connections with various aspects of ourselves as we inhabit particular roles) and inter-connections (connections with each other as we inhabit particular organizational groupings).

The boundaries that this type of structuring depends upon are not simply abstract limits that exist primarily on paper and carry little meaning into our substantive experience of the world. We experience organizational boundaries very tangibly, even viscerally (Diamond, Allcorn et al. 2004). Such experience is reflective of social structuring in general, according to much of the social-psychological literature on identity. The bounded relational dynamics at work here are a key element in the generation of the self and the derivation of meaning, as we will see shortly. The fundamental contradiction of this way of seeing the world with what I have described as the fullness and oneness inherent in radical engagement should be apparent at first glance, but a brief look at the sociological literature on identity will make this contradiction even starker.

Identity Boundaries and Social Structure

The various theories of identity in the literature can be divided into three categories: those that frame identity as a personal construct, those that frame it as a relational construct, and those that frame it as a collective construct (Brewer and Gardner 1996). Before the 1970s, most theories focused on personal identity, but since then there has been a great deal of attention paid to relational and collective identities (Cerulo 1997) and an overall emphasis on identity less as a psychological phenomenon than as a social one (Howard 2000; Polletta and Jasper 2001). Below, I explore two of the most important identity theories: Identity Theory, which is a relational explanation, and Social Identity Theory, which, though not a theory of collective identity in its own right, relates personal identity to collective categorical frames.

Identity Theory: Understanding Roles

Identity Theory (McCall and Simmons 1966) was first developed in the 1960s and 1970s by scholars working in the symbolic interactionist tradition of George Herbert Meade. Symbolic Interactionism is an interpretive approach to identity and behavior that focuses on the way that people generate meanings through social interaction and then use those meanings to guide their actions. Identity Theory extends this tradition by focusing very specifically on the ways in which *role* identities function as mediating concepts between social structures and individual experiences of the self. People know who they are by where they fit in the role-segmented social landscape. Not every personal quality relates to a role of course, only those that differentiate one person from another *and* map onto a social function. A ‘breather’ is not a role, because everyone breathes, and breathing is not a social function. Personal characteristics like hair color may differentiate us, but they are not roles (unless they happen to take on a socially located meaning – blonds as the ruling class, for example). Note that the “function” need not be a concrete activity (e.g., cooking, clerking). It can be more abstract and symbolic – a “Queen” who represents God to her “subjects,” for example.

Identity theory, then, explores the ways that people use roles to understand themselves and to relate to each other. Three features of Identity Theory are notable for our purposes (Hogg, Terry et al. 1995; Stets and Burke 2000):

- *Saliency*: People take on multiple roles – father and baker perhaps. In any given social context, some roles will be seen as more salient than others and thus activated. Saliency can be relatively fixed. I may always identify more strongly with being a father than being a baker. But saliency can also be highly contextual. Around other bakers, my role as a father might be relatively meaningless to me, even if in general it forms a powerful part of my core set of identities. Most importantly, once a role is accepted as salient or activated in a given situation, a person’s mode of interaction and relationship is essentially circumscribed or bounded by that role, although not completely. McCall and Simmons (1966) liken role interaction to improvisational performance (c.f. Goffman 1959).
- *Complementarity*. A role is a relational construction. It defines who a person is in terms of how she relates to others. Roles only mean something in complement to other roles. ‘Father’ makes sense only in relation to ‘son’ or ‘daughter’ or ‘mother’. ‘Baker’ makes sense only in relation to ‘butcher’ or ‘customer’. Note that the first example, ‘father’, literally cannot be defined without reference to son/daughter/child. Whereas ‘baker’ can certainly be defined simply as one who bakes bread. However, in Identity Theory, the role identity only means something when it differentiates someone from those who produce other kinds of food (or from those who buy the food, or supply the ingredients, etc.). From the perspective of a socially derived identity, ‘baker’ does not describe just any function, it describes a comparative and interdependent function.

- *Performance Evaluation.* People evaluate themselves and each other based how well they “perform” their roles (according to their own interpretations of socially given role criteria). That is, self-esteem and self-efficacy are directly related to role performance, making role boundaries particularly strong.

In terms of possibilities for radical engagement, the picture painted by Identity Theory is discouraging. If most social interaction operates via narrow roles that confine us to limited and largely pre-defined aspects of ourselves, we generally experience little opportunity for anything like true self-exploration or expression in a social context. There is no question of fullness, or even its happy pursuit, in such a social world. At best, we are able to inhabit a variety of roles that allow us access to multiple parts of ourselves. But given that each social interaction will tend to be dependent on only one (or a small handful) of these roles at any given time, there is little chance for meaningful integration. It becomes difficult, within our relationships, to pursue energies or dimensions of the self that transcend particular roles. Being so compartmentalized, we are unable to explore or express the more interesting and mysterious parts of ourselves that would cross our own interpretive boundaries.

Another important dynamic to understand in any role system is that people come to be seen, and to see themselves, instrumentally. The function associated with the role is what mediates and defines the relationship. To me (and to yourself) you not only do accounting, you are an accountant. Accounting is what you are *for*. It is both the center and the limit of my experience of you. I might acknowledge intellectually that you are much more than an accountant. But if my daily interactions with you are rigidly circumscribed by your balance sheets and income statements, I end up thinking of you primarily in terms of what you can do for me and for the organization. You are an instrument, with no fundamental value other than your usefulness. Perhaps I seem to be stating this idea too strongly. Most of us acknowledge that accountants are people too. But the role dynamic is not simply about how we describe each other. We are perfectly capable of recognizing the limitations of our descriptions, after all. The role dynamic is about how we interact with each other. That is, I may believe at some superficial level that you are a whole person with essential value of your own unconnected to what you can do for me, but if I relate to you mainly in terms of what you can do for me, my superficial belief won't matter much. Insofar as roles are our primary mode of interaction, we will continually reinforce a sense of compartmentalization and instrumentality in each other.

Roles may constrict an individual's sense of self, but role systems do provide us with a mechanism for connecting to others, and there is empirical support for this (Yuki 2003). Since roles are rooted in complementarity, there is no particular reason that a given role system couldn't be at least theoretically open to everyone. The mode of interaction between various roles may be narrow and functional but there is no apparent contradiction here with the second keystone of radical engagement – oneness or complete interconnection. However, given that an organization, like any social structure, is not simply a role system but also a group system, radical engagement does in fact meet another barrier.

Social Identity Theory: Understanding Groups

Social Identity Theory and the closely related Self Categorization Theory are social-psychological explanations of the identity dynamics of people in groups (Abrams and Hogg 1990; Hogg, Terry et al. 1995; Stets and Burke 2000). Whenever a person perceives herself to be part of a particular group, she begins to identify with that group and the group identity begins to take on something like an objective existence (Hogg and Abrams 1988). That is, she perceives group characteristics, however they might be defined, as comprising an essential part of who she is (her fundamental nature, her place in the world, etc.). Being a Smith, or a woman, or an IBM employee, or an accountant, becomes a central dimension through which the self is understood. Social identification has three key features (Turner 1999; Deaux and Martin 2003):

- *Homogeneity*: The social category is perceived as exaggeratedly homogenous. Empirical studies show that as identification with the category becomes stronger, the perceived similarity of group members increases. One of the major motivations for group identification appears to be uncertainty reduction; another is to increase relative self-esteem (Hogg and Terry 2000).
- *Comparison*: Identification with the social category is further reinforced by comparing it with other social categories. Psychologically, we seem to reinforce our social identities not only by exaggerating homogeneity within the group, but by exaggerating the homogeneity of other groups and the differences between those groups and our group. Groups are not seen as complementary or relational. They are seen as fundamentally distinct and disconnected. Moreover, comparisons are made along dimensions that favor the self-identified group and diminish the out-group. People reinforce their identification with the in-group by negatively evaluating out-groups. In a sense, Social Identity Theory is not just a theory of social groups or social categories, it is a theory of social classes, in that the groups or categories are always evaluated against each other vertically. A given group will be seen as more attractive, powerful, etc. than another and people will make the mental effort (and often the political/institutional effort) to place their category in the highest possible position. What's particularly striking about this comparative/evaluative mechanism as it has been tested empirically is that it kicks in right away with even the first movement toward group identification. In one laboratory study, people were divided into random groups with no obvious shared connection within the given groups. Despite the lack of a pre-existing, observable social category, people began to create such a category. They identified with their group, began to exaggerate its homogeneity and compared it to other groups primarily along dimensions that were favorable to their group. (Tajfel 1970). In other words, the simple fact of being placed in a group created an immediate and fairly severe social-psychological barrier. In Social Identity Theory, a group is not simply a way of relating to fellow group members or feeling good about ourselves, it is a way of disconnecting from and feeling negatively toward other groups. The more people interact via their group

identities (intergroup) and the less they interact as individuals (interpersonally), the more extreme and reductive the social identity dynamic becomes (Turner 1999).

- *Stereotypicality*: Power springs less from functional ability or centrality than from the degree to which an individual embodies the stereotypical characteristics of the group. The more representative of the group one is, the more one is esteemed, since the stereotypical dimensions of the group have been psychologically exaggerated and given positive evaluative content. For example, suppose that “engineers” are seen (by themselves) as preferring simple, practical clothing to stylish dress. Even though dress has nothing to do with engineering ability, engineers will hold a person who dresses “like an engineer” in higher regard than a person who dresses differently.

In short, the psychological mechanisms involved in group identification, which apparently occur automatically, seem directly to contradict our deeper yearning for oneness. If we engage with some people through strong group identification, we subconsciously distance ourselves from the majority of others.

To summarize Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory in terms of structural effects, roles are parts we play in relation to other parts of the social structure and they contradict our pursuit of fullness. Social groups are categories we occupy in contrast to other categories and they contradict our pursuit of oneness. The following table reiterates the key dynamics of these two modes of identity construction:

	Identity Theory	Social Identity Theory
Disciplinary roots	Sociology	Social Psychology
Mediator between individual identity and social structure	Role Salience	Group or Category Homogeneity & Salience
Mode of relationship	Complementarity	Comparison/Contrast
Evaluation via	Role Performance	Stereotypicality

Identity Boundaries and Organizational Structure

Turning our attention back to organizations, the situation is even more doubtful. An organization is an especially constricted role structure. Herbert Simon (1997) points out that organizational roles are “highly elaborated, relatively stable, and defined to a considerable extent in explicit and even written terms.” In Simon’s view, it is this stability, this “predictability” that is largely responsible for enabling “organizations to deal in a coordinated way with their environments.” Similarly, organizations rely on extremely elaborate categorical groups, all of which provoke the social identity comparative mechanism: project teams, departments, divisions, and units; blue collars and white collars; professionals and support staff; seniors, juniors, associates, and interns; shifts and crews; employees, customers, suppliers, competitors, shareholders, etc. (Ashforth and Mael 1989). It is clear that our organizations are built not only from specialization, but from segmentation (see e.g., McDowell, Batnitzky et al. 2007).

If roles and groups are the two foundational dimensions of organizational structure, we can think of an organization as essentially an identity matrix – an arrangement of role identities and group identities. Each person is located somewhere in this identity matrix. What’s more, because organizations are by definition purposeful, functional entities, organizational role and group identities tend to reinforce each other. Consider an accountant. She comes to identify strongly with her role as someone who monitors and reports on the financial operations of the firm. It is as an accountant – not as someone with four sisters or who plays the cello – that she interacts with other people in the firm. At the same time, this identity as an accountant is also a social category. She feels connected to the idea of accountancy and emphasizes her similarities with other accountants. She views other groups (lawyers, clerical staff, maintenance people) through psychological lenses that tend to reinforce the uniqueness and superiority of accountants. Thus the accounting department may seek to occupy a privileged position within the organization, or perhaps her identification with accounting will supercede her identification with the organization as a whole (as a group) and she will work for “accounting power” in a larger context through professional institutions of various sorts. Her identification with the category ‘accountant’ will, of course, reinforce her identification with the functional role, which will in turn reinforce her identification with the category, etc.. The circle is an ever-tightening one, and not altogether comfortable. The net effect is that, as we inhabit organizations, we draw upon ever narrower parts of ourselves through which to relate to the world, and we feel connected to ever fewer people as our category boundaries reinforce separateness.

This dynamic holds true not only for formally defined roles and groups but for informal ones as well, though the psychological effects may be more subconscious. It is even true of structural framing concepts that we might not think of as defining roles or groups at all. For example, Knights and Morgan (1990; 1991) present a particularly interesting discussion of the way in which even apparently generic functions like “strategy” are actually identity frames. They see the “strategic actor” identity not as the result of a rational, functional, organizational approach to problem-solving (they reject such a category all together), but as the result of a discourse driven by the power and security impulses of managers.

So far, we’ve been examining organizational structure in a fairly simple, static way – an org-chart version of identity theory, if you will. But these identity themes hold up when viewed through more complex structural lenses. Take Mintzberg’s (1979; 1980) work on organizational structuring. He defines five coordinating mechanisms at the heart of the structuring process. I consider each in turn.

- *Direct supervision* involves coordination via someone with line authority exerting direct control over a given set of work decisions. It is common in small entrepreneurial firms and in large “machine bureaucracies” (Mintzberg’s term for organizations dominated by the upper line management in the technical core). We can view direct supervision as a particularly rigid sort of role structure for the people under supervision. Their role is simply to obey, to follow orders. In their lack of agency and expression, very few of their human qualities can be accessed

while they are at work. But even “supervisors” in such a structure can come to see themselves largely in terms of their own authority. (Knights and Morgan’s discussion of strategy, referenced above, bears this out.) That is, they play the role of the authority figure, the decision maker, and may become disconnected from other aspects of themselves that may not fit this role (perhaps fear, or curiosity, or compassion, or creative expression, for example). Returning to Srinivas’s theory of “androidization,” though managers might experience greater material benefits than those they supervise, they suffer a similar constriction of agency and self-expression, perhaps suggesting that Knights and Morgan’s view of “strategizers,” while an interesting image of identity processes, does not necessarily result in real psychological/spiritual benefits at the deepest level. Supervisory structures give rise not only to role constriction but also to group identification. Managers and workers come to see themselves as fundamentally different types of people. At worst this leads to deep mistrust and competitive political maneuvering, at best it results in a polite distancing. Either way, the boundary has been set and social identity processes of self-categorization take root.

- *Standardization of outputs* involves precise specification of work product without significant control over input or processes. Workers are fairly independent in this case, at least in terms of methods. In their ability to adopt various approaches to their work, they have some room for creativity and exploration of different aspects of the self. Ultimately, though, their role as producer is quite narrowly defined, particularly with respect to the purpose or meaning of their own work and how that purpose relates to their own modes of expression. The role of “producer” of a particular type of output is as constricting as most other roles in terms of identity. And since the specifications of output are dictated by other people (technical staff presumably), there is an immediate categorical divide between those who decide and those who execute. The category or class dynamic then is likely to be much the same as in a structure based on direct supervision. In fact, the categorical boundary may be much stronger in this case. Direct supervision, after all, allows some room for dialogue and feedback (depending on the culture). The line between the deciders and doers may blur in practice though the line between ‘manager’ and ‘worker’ is unlikely to. However, in an output-standardized structure, the deciders are physically removed from the doers for the most part. Specifications are transmitted formally after technical analysts decide what they should be. So the boundaries between these two broad categories of organization member can be quite severe.
- *Standardization of skills (and knowledge)* is the central coordinating mode of organizations that rely on highly skilled/trained workers. It is often associated with professional organizations (e.g., law firms) and therefore has a significant extra-organizational, institutional component. Because the roles in question are so heavily institutionalized, again they are likely to draw on or even leave room for only limited parts of the self. A lawyer may have many more kinds of role restrictions on her comportment, appearance, communication style, manner of thinking about problems, and general approach to work than even the most

closely supervised factory worker. This is because a lawyer inhabits a role with centuries of institutionalization undergirding it and years of required training designed precisely to maintain its institutional parameters. It is true that a lawyer has a certain kind of freedom that someone in a supervisory or output-standardized structure does not. In that sense, a lawyer has the agency to be richly expressive, but it is only within a very narrow domain of thought and action that such agency exists. The same institutionalizing factors that constrain a professional's role description also clearly delimit a very precise social category. One is either a lawyer or not. Professions are among the strongest modes of establishing us/them social boundaries (Lamont and Molnar 2002). Within organizations the distinctions between professionals and other types of staff are strict. Professionals often occupy privileged positions not only with respect to support staff, but also with respect to top management. (Think of doctors and hospital administrators, or professors and university presidents.)

- *Standardization of work processes* is a structuring pattern that relies on precise descriptions of workflow and technique, often right down to very small time intervals. There is little need for constant supervision or for training and indoctrination since there is almost no latitude for behavioral decisions. Workers essentially function as machines, with no room to respond to particular urges, ideas, or curiosities of their own. And the categorical distinction between those who decide and those who do not is probably even more severe than in a supervised structure or an output-standardized structure.
- *Mutual adjustment*, which Mintzberg associates with small, simple organizations and with very large, complex organizations, is a self-organizing, organic form of structuring in which methods, processes, outputs, styles, etc. are continually generated and adjusted as people interact with each other. Mintzberg was prefiguring in a general way the development of complexity theory as it applies to organizations (Wheatley 2001; Holbrook 2003). Self-organization would seem to be the least restrictive of the structuring approaches in terms of role and group boundaries. In terms of engagement, the key issue then becomes what sorts of "adjustments" are organization members making to each other. Adjustment may be very instrumental, based on the need simply to get some sort of predefined work done, in which case everyone is locked into an instrumental "producer" role. More elaborated, informal role patterns may arise over time. Group boundaries can also arise organically – at a minimum the basic boundary between those who are doing the work in question and everyone else inside or outside of the organization. The self-organization at the root of complex adaptive systems does offer the potential for a different sort of organizing – one based less on boundaries than on open, mutual exploration - but it does not guarantee that role and group identities won't come into play in the usual constricting ways.

The mutual adjustment inherent in self-organizing systems may seem to open up new possibilities for a deeper sort of engagement than we usually find in controlled and centralized systems, but we are now presented with a new problem. We can't design self-

organizing systems at the level of form, as this would be a contradiction in terms. At the same time, there may be room for system-level agency within a self-organizing system at the level of intention. That is, we can self-organize via any number of relational dynamics: selfishness or fear as well as love or creativity. The spiritual architecture of the resulting system will largely be defined in terms of the relational mode through which it was built. A self-organizing system cannot guarantee radical engagement, but it may offer us new possibilities for its pursuit. To understand these possibilities, and to see similar possibilities even in more formally structured contexts, we need to explore the relationship between identity and organization more carefully at the root level. Institutional theorists offer us an opportunity to do just that, as they study how and why individual identity impulses coalesce into broader, institutionalized social patterns.

Mining Institutional Theory: Anxiety as Structure

Institutional theories exist in many disciplines, but we're concerned here with the "old" and "new" institutionalism in sociology and organization studies. Institutional sociologists study intersubjective social phenomena that seem to have taken on a fact-like or rule-like status, thereby turning into semi-objective, stable, pervasive social structures (DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Scott 2001). The phenomena in question might be political and organizational forms, rituals and codes of behavior, mental frames, or relationship types and groupings. From this perspective, constitutions, bureaucracies, modes of greeting or worship, conceptions of private property, and nuclear families are all examples of institutionally given social structures. The old institutionalism of Selznick saw values as the primary driver of institutionalization; the new institutionalism of Schutz and Berger and Luckmann sees cognitive maps of "reality" as the chief institutional drivers (Scott 1987). That is, in the old institutionalist view, a structure like an organization becomes institutionalized when it is so infused with values as to acquire a personality and worth (and therefore persistence) beyond its purely functional purpose. To the new institutionalists, a structure is most fully institutionalized when it is cognitively submerged, taken for granted as just another inescapable piece of reality.

Most institutional scholars, particularly in organization studies, work at a relatively macro level of analysis, often focusing on fields of organizations that share a given institutional paradigm. But the founding threads of institutional theory are concerned with the connection between the psychological/behavioral micro-patterns of individuals and larger structural patterns. These threads offer us insight into *why* institutional structures in general, and organizations in particular, are largely maintained via role and group boundaries. We'll turn to two threads in particular, the classic organizational institutionalism of Selznick and the new institutional sociology of Berger and Luckmann.

Old Institutionalism: The "Whole Person" Puts in an Appearance

Selznick (1948; 1984a; 1984b) was among the first theorists to explore organizational structuring from a non-Weberian perspective. Selznick does acknowledge the importance of the Weberian abstracted role system in which "it is necessary for the relations within the structure to be determined in such a way that individuals will be interchangeable and

the organization will thus be free of dependence upon personal qualities” (1948: 25). But his main preoccupation (like ours) is what happens when people “interact as wholes” (26) with this role system. Like Barnard (1968), Selznick is very attuned to the fullness of human nature, the non-rational, multi-dimensional qualities, emotions, and relational commitments that make us up. He sees, however, a powerful tension between this fullness and the organization’s instrumental, rational role system.

From the standpoint of organization as a formal system, persons are viewed functionally, in respect to their roles, as participants in assigned segments of the cooperative system. But in fact individuals have a propensity to resist depersonalization, to spill over the boundaries of their segmentary roles, to participate as wholes. The formal systems (at an extreme, the disposition of “rifles” at a military perimeter) cannot take account of the deviations thus introduced, and consequently break down as instruments of control when relied upon alone. The whole individual raises new problems for the organization, partly because of the needs of his own personality, partly because he brings with him a set of established habits as well, perhaps as commitments to special groups outside of the organization. (1948: 26)

His tone grows Shakespearean: “. . . the non-rational dimensions of organizational behavior . . . remain at once indispensable to the continued existence of the system of coordination and at the same time the source of friction, dilemma, doubt, and ruin” (25). However, this tension is essential. The “reciprocal influences of the formal and informal aspects of organization” are what give the organization its “concrete structure” (28). In describing informal patterns, Selznick consistently mention cliques, ties of friendship, class loyalty, power groupings, and other types of external commitments. These might sound familiar to us by now, as he is essentially describing the various role and group identities a person carries with her into the organization. So even though he is moving well beyond the organizationally defined identities implied in Mintzberg’s categories of structuring, his own structuring dynamics are rooted in a similar, though socially broader, identity matrix. In that sense, Selznick’s “whole person” is not an authentic portrait of fullness exactly: more like a collection of predefined social identities.

Selznick goes on to say that these identities can be absorbed into the organization in such a way that they both strengthen the organization’s formal goals and expand the organization’s *raison d’etre*. “Organizations become institutions as they are *infused with value*, that is, prized not as tools alone but as sources of direct personal gratification and vehicles of group integrity” (40). He develops his concept of institutionalization to describe the process by which an organization comes to be held together or “integrated” by such values, which may be explicitly defined in formal structures, but are more generally sustained via informal cultural patterns. He sees this process as largely *defensive* and frames it as analogous to the psychological process by which individuals integrate various commitments. Selznick is among the first to see clear “structural-functional homologies” (30) between organizations and persons. Since the organization, like the person, is primarily concerned with self-preservation, it adopts “certain repetitive defense mechanisms” (30), to wit, growth, ideologies, and cooptation. Cooptation is one

of Selznick's signal contributions; it is "the process of absorbing new elements into the leadership or policy determining structure of an organization as a means of averting threats to its stability or existence" (34). Put another way, when threatened by other organizational or political structures, the organization redraws its boundaries to include (and thus disarm) the threat. The value commitments of the organization shift, either by including new people/organizations directly in governance or by altering the organization's mission.

Over time, the organization begins to craft an identity that allows it to survive in its socio-political environment. Although Selznick emphasizes the unique "character" that each institutionalized organization creates, he is clear that this character is essentially a role, a particular location in social space adopted as a defensive posture and shaped by the pre-existing role categories available in that social space. A similar defensive posture leads the organization to align itself with various social macro-groups. Thus, for Selznick, both individuals and organizations build their identities via boundaries. However, while he clearly sees the organizational identity process as analogous to the individual identity process (he frequently uses individual analogies to explain organizational dynamics), he does not systematically explore the link between the two level of analysis. He mainly adopts an organization's-eye point of view.

New Institutionalism: The Cognitive Turn

Neo-institutional theory (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Zucker 1977; DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Tolbert and Zucker 1996; Scott 2001) explores this individual-institutional/organizational link more clearly. Berger and Luckmann (1967) give perhaps the clearest description of what many institutional sociologists take to be the emergent process of institution building. Institutions are born when habitual (repeating) human activity is cast into patterns that are reciprocally acknowledged. Activity here includes both actions and actors. Habitual actions are typified in routines. Actors performing such actions are typified in roles. You and I notice that you are consistently gathering sticks and I am consistently cooking meals. "Stick gathering" comes to be framed in just the way that you do it and you come to be framed as a "stick gatherer." "Cooking" and "cook" are similarly framed. And meanings (perhaps safety or health or livelihood or nurturing or affection, etc.) become embedded in these routines and roles. Over time, as the origins of cooking and stick-gathering fade from memory and as more people participate in their ongoing typification, the activities, their meanings, and the roles associated with them become both objective (separate from the individual subjects who created them) and cognitively submerged (we begin to take them for granted, forgetting that there is any other way to think about them or approach them).² Such objectification and cognitive submergence are the primary characteristics of institutionalization. As a pattern of activity or a role becomes institutionalized, it begins to be taken for "reality"

² This description of proto-institution building is of course reductive, particularly as it seems to depend upon pre-existing "selves" who in some sense build institutions. Many theorists, notably Giddens (1984), see the relationship between structures and individuals as embedded, recursive to the point where it makes no sense to even talk about an "individual" or a "self" (psychologically, not biologically, of course) without positing a concurrent social structure.

and it is increasingly difficult to think about it. At times it is difficult even to see it. (Note: the preceding illustration is my own synthesis and simplification of the neo-institutionalist description of institutionalization.)

At the heart of this process is not decision-making but pattern-making or, using Weick's term, "sense-making" (1995). We recognize certain kinds of activities and then connect them. A pattern is something we create by paying particular *attention* to experiences and then creating a mental or ritual category to contain those experiences. As Weick says, "People discover their own inventions" (15). But few theorists have much to say about *why* we cast particular activities and their associated meanings into patterns. Surely we do not ascribe institutionalizing patterns to all repeated activities. If the stick-gatherer above scratches the left side of his head every morning before gathering sticks, we won't necessarily even notice this, let alone recognize it as a meaningful pattern. Clearly, we do not typify all of our habits. Some seem to us beneath notice – they are personal, or unimportant. Others may never even register in our consciousness. So why do we notice and then typify the particular kinds of things that we tend to institutionalize? Why are we – collectively/intersubjectively – paying attention to some things and not others? What is it that we use to decide (whether consciously or unconsciously) what will enter into our pattern-making awareness?

Giddens (1984) is one of the few theorists to offer an answer to this question. He says that the underlying principle directing our attention and actions is *anxiety*, "control of which suggests itself as the most generalized motivational origin of human conduct" (54). Few scholars offer as clear a description of the motivational roots of social structure. I would argue (and did in the first part of this paper) that radical engagement is a second foundational "generalized motivation" and is available as a guide if we so choose. But looking over our institutional landscape, anxiety certainly seems to be winning the war. Intuitively, a great number of our visible institutions do seem designed to *protect* us against something or other: social programs to relieve hunger, regulations to ensure that medicines aren't dangerous, legal mores to prevent lawyers from betraying their clients, organizational governance structures to prevent shirking, stealing, heedless decisions, etc. The focus seems to be not on where we want to go but on where we're afraid we'll end up if suitable protections aren't in place. An institution from this perspective is a psychological solution to a perceived problem. We experience a general anxiety about our own safety and/or identity. We pay attention to the things that relieve that anxiety. Then we shape these things into patterns, allowing us to feel that the problem has been solved in a stable, relatively persistent way. Selznick's focus on defensive processes hints at something like this dynamic. Current neo-institutional scholars focusing on institutional fields have developed more varied descriptions of institutionalization processes than Selznick's, but they too implicitly support an essentially defensive mode of structure creation, replication, and maintenance. They describe the ways in which organizations fight to preserve themselves and grow by adopting or shaping institutional patterns in order to strengthen their perceived legitimacy (see e.g., Elsbach 1994; Greve 1995; Suchman 1995).

Why are boundaries (here roles and groups) the building blocks of defensive structures? They relieve us of anxiety by constricting our decision-making landscape, narrowing the scale and scope of our relationships, and making the behavior of others (and of ourselves) more predictable. They also provide a way of distinguishing between good and bad and then insulate us from whatever we have labeled bad. (See, for example, Allcorn's (1995) discussion of organizational culture as largely anxiety driven.) Note that if we adopt Giddens' views on structuration, we don't need to see either the psychological or the social/institutional structures as primary. They feed, constrain, and define each other. In many ways they are the same thing: our impulse toward bounded identities is expressed in our organizational forms, and the geography of our organizations is reproduced daily in our own minds. Selznick's homologies are, in fact, inevitable, because social systems (or organizations) and individuals are mutually and recursively created and defined. As long as an organization's primary impulse is to preserve itself, it will adopt an essentially defensive stance toward the world, including its own members. It will be constructed primarily via boundaries and will be inhospitable to radical engagement.

The "Whole Person" Meets the Human Relations School

Institutional theory and Giddens' related structuration theory are almost entirely descriptive. While these theories offer a great deal of insight into how institutions and organizations are created and maintained, they do not concern themselves with the problem of engagement or with any problem that would require a shift in the way that we have, until now, generally organized ourselves. The Human Relations School of organization theory takes a different approach. The Human Relations School comprises a collection of literature that, in contrast to organizational theories based on the economic portrait of rational man, focuses on the emotional and social needs of workers. Beginning with Elton Mayo's work in the 1930s and 1940s, the Human Relations approach is unapologetically prescriptive, championing various methods of reorganizing ourselves to account for the psychological complexities of human nature (Scott 1998).

With its focus on leadership, group dynamics, motivation, and job satisfaction, the Human Relations School has been influential; it was responsible for creating and framing much of the early conversation in what we now call Organizational Behavior and Organizational Development (Perrow 1986). It seems at first glance to be closely aligned with the theme of this paper: human engagement in organizational contexts. However, despite appearances, the Human Relations School departs substantially from what we are calling radical engagement. This departure is revealing.

Critiques of the Human Relations School (which are voluminous) are twofold (Perrow 1986; Scott 1998). First, it is seen as inauthentic and instrumental: a superficial attempt to pacify workers and increase productivity without disturbing the existing socio-political landscape. There is considerable evidence for this point of view. Mayo himself was ardently opposed to political or workplace democracy and viewed the average person as an unreliable judge of his own affairs let alone the good of society (O'Connor 1999). He believed all forms of agitation or social protest sprang from the psychological dysfunction of the agitator. In raising funding for his own research from large businesses,

he positioned his work as a non-violent way to pacify a recalcitrant and misguided labor force. While not as blatant, other important Human Relations theorists share similarly instrumental views. McGregor (1960), for example, begins his classic overview of Human Relations through the lens of “Theory X” and “Theory Y” by stating outright: “One of the major tasks of management is to organize human effort in the service of the economic objectives of the enterprise . . . Successful managements depends – not alone, but significantly – upon the ability to predict and control human behavior” (3-4). He goes on to claim that prediction and control are quite possible if one only adopts the appropriate scientific tools (which he will, of course, present in the ensuing chapters).

The second main critique of the Human Relations School is that most of its theories simply aren’t true. Methodological critiques and counter-demonstrations abound (Perrow 1986). While the Human Relations portrait of the human may be more dimensional than the purely economic portrait, it is still extremely reductive, attempting to find direct correlations between organizational phenomena (e.g., productivity) and a small number of narrowly defined metrics. Consequently, conclusions based on fieldwork are often highly contestable and far from clear even on their own terms.

I mention the Human Relations school here, because I want to make it clear that, in my view, a fundamentally spiritual state like engagement cannot be viewed through a simplified behavioral lens, nor can it be tamed and made to serve, unquestioning, the organization’s goals. One of the barriers to studying engagement is that most prescriptive scholars have quite happily adopted the instrumental point of view. They see their role almost exclusively in terms of making organizations more effective with respect to the organization’s formal goals (though this viewpoint is somewhat less dominant in Europe) (Scott 1998). I have defined radical engagement as essentially the pursuit of ultimate meaning. One can’t make the goal of “ultimate meaning” subsidiary to some larger goal (e.g., organizational profitability), since it then immediately ceases to be “ultimate.”

There are scholars in the Human Relations tradition who have taken a non-instrumental approach. I’ll briefly highlight one, Frederick Herzberg, because his work illustrates a final, seemingly insurmountable problem for radical engagement in organizational settings. In *Work and the Nature of Man* (1966), Herzberg calls into question the assumption that behavioral psychologists have a significant role to play in increasing the efficiency and profitability of enterprise – the assumption upon which most of the Human Relations School is based.

The fact is that the increase in profits that the psychologists can effect at any one time is slight in comparison with the effects of the engineers, marketing experts and sales department. This is not to minimize the proven practical results of psychological understanding and psychological tools, but my experiences have demonstrated to me that managers and other workers, while seeking practical help with business problems, are also eager to learn from psychologists what their own jobs and lives are about. This seems a more warranted and valid area for investigation and study by behavioral scientists. (viii)

Herzberg goes on to make the still-radical claim that organizations are here to serve humans and not the reverse.

The 'instrumental' man finds his greatest happiness in being an unattached expert. In rereading this description, one recalls the name of Adolf Eichmann. (42)

. . . man is protesting not merely the treatment society accords him but the very conception of his nature as it has been fostered by the prevailing institutions. He seems to demand a more realistic appraisal of his nature than the myths about him that have so conveniently and over so long a period been provided. (viii)

Although society speaks of man's achieving his potential, we are actually retarding human achievement. The problem of achievement (or present lack of it) is central to the subject of this essay. Industry must realize that it is one of the despoilers of man's efforts to achieve happiness – in spite of management's most sincere attempts to do just the opposite . . . My task is to offer a definition of man's total needs, one that is consistent within the world of work. (x)

Herzberg's prescriptions for organizational change are grounded in the belief that work should primarily be designed around "motivational" dynamics related to self-expression, learning, and growth rather than "hygiene" dynamics of safety, financial security, equity, etc. Hygiene has to be attended to to avoid worker dissatisfaction, but motivation is necessary for real satisfaction. We can think of hygiene here as all those factors related to physical and psychological self-preservation. To focus mainly on hygiene is to adopt the kind of defensive stance discussed above. Motivation, on the other hand, is not about defense. It implies an open, unbounded sort of growth and exploration. Like most Human Relations theories, motivation-hygiene theory has been challenged empirically, but what is important for our purposes is Herzberg's overall stance. He seems to be asking (and answering) the very question at the heart of this paper.

What are Herzberg's prescriptions? He offers two central principles, and they are both structural. First, he proposes that a "motivation division" of management be added and given equal weight to the (already implicitly existing) hygiene division of management. The motivation division would operate largely from a non-instrumental (or at least less instrumental) perspective based on the personal growth and development of each employee. Motivation staff would "plan and review the growth potential of all jobs" (187). A "teaching objective" of this division "would be to alter the basis of loyalty to the company from that embedded, in a sense, in hygiene to that of a more mature loyalty based on self-fulfillment" (176). Herzberg's second structural principle is "job enlargement." He means this both horizontally and vertically. The tasks associated with a given job would be more varied and complex, calling for knowledge and creativity. And the decision-making role of the worker would similarly be enlarged, as these broader job boundaries would necessitate a greater degree of autonomy. Herzberg's job enlargement is essentially role enlargement.

Why then is Herzberg criticized in much the same way that most Human Relations theorists are? His perspective has been influential and perhaps helpful in many ways, but there is no sense in which the modest results of his prescriptions live up to the radical ambition of his goals. I believe that Herzberg has identified the problem of organizational engagement in a compelling, if dated, way. But his solution relies on the same bounded role/group geometry that this paper challenges. We are offered no alternative geometry. Job enlargement does not transcend role boundaries, it simply expands them. His roles may be broader and more flexible, but they remain the fundamental structural building block of the organization. And his new group, his “department of motivation,” simply reinforces several socially identified distinctions (e.g., manager vs. worker, expert vs. subject, “hygienist” vs. “motivator,” etc.).

If even the most direct and heartfelt challenges to our current organizational paradigms fail to develop meaningful structural alternatives, we may find ourselves wondering if the answer to the question, “Can organizations be radically engaging?” is, “No.” Perhaps an organization is necessarily a bounded thing, built on principles immovably opposed to fullness and oneness. If organizations are institutionalized via our deepest anxieties, won’t the social structures we develop in response to those anxieties necessarily be constructed via identity boundaries? One might easily reach the conclusion, based on the literature reviewed above, that organizations are inalterably dis-engaging from a spiritual perspective. Maybe there is only one geometry.

And yet . . .

Santropol Roulant

I first stumbled into Santropol Roulant grudgingly enough. I was looking for an organization with which to do some pilot ethnographic work around the concept of engagement (see Nilsson 2006). My partner, Tana, suggested a small meals-on-wheels organization she had heard about as being a particularly lively place. On the surface, few types of organizations could have been less attractive to me. There are thousands of meals-on-wheels programs in North America preparing meals and delivering them to the homebound. Most of them rely heavily on volunteers. It is a valuable and unfortunately necessary service, but there is nothing particularly innovative about it. Such programs run now very similarly to the way they ran decades ago when they were first conceived. I was looking for something sexier, more visionary. Still, I kept hearing about Santropol Roulant’s astonishing ability to attract volunteers, particularly young people. The organization did no advertising and almost no outreach, but at any given time it had some 200 volunteers actively engaged in its work. It also was known for focusing on intergenerational community building and the personal development of both clients and volunteers. Though the meals were important, they were seen as a vehicle for deeper change, not as an end in themselves.

So I poked my head in the door one day, and in some ways have never left. What I found was a place brimming with vitality, enthusiasm, and a general sense of invitation, but without anything cliquish in its culture or dogmatic in its mission. All sorts of people

interacted with the organization in all sorts of ways. Yet they described their experiences there in very similar terms. Most saw Santropol Roulant as a place where they could explore parts of themselves and interact with other people in particularly profound, yet unforced ways, all while connecting to a larger sense of community and possibility that itself was gentle, non-ideological, and often even unarticulated. People talked about a kind of freedom – the freedom to be oneself, to interact with others in simple and satisfying ways, and to participate in the work precisely in the manner and to the degree that they wanted to. This is not an empirical study, so I'll not say much more about the place at the moment, but as I began observing and talking to people about their experiences at Santropol Roulant, two structural themes became very clear.

First, though the organization did have fairly traditional roles on the surface (executive director, client coordinator, etc.), the roles were extraordinarily supple, changing not only with each new person hired (or volunteering) but with each subtle shift in a given person's ideas and curiosities. People were actively encouraged to bring different parts of themselves to work, whether those parts fit their roles or not. They were also encouraged to cross over into other roles, to start new projects, and in general to follow their own energies and intuitions. Roles, at most, were temporarily useful tools. At times, they seemed almost vestigial. More important than such task flexibility, however, was that the ways in which people related to each other personally seemed to have almost nothing to do with their roles at all. Volunteers often didn't even know whether the person they were talking to was staff or another volunteer and even when someone's title was clear, in almost no sense did that title mediate personal interaction. This was my own observation, but it was also reinforced many, many times during my interviews. People described their relationships with other people at Santropol Roulant as feeling unusually authentic. "I feel like myself here," was one typical way of putting it, or, "People treat me like a whole person." Interestingly, this was equally true of people who were describing relationships that weren't particularly intimate or deep. That is, the feeling of freedom and authenticity had little to do with how well people knew each other or how much they revealed about their personal lives in conversation. Authenticity seemed to be a quality in even the most fleeting, mundane encounters in which almost nothing personal was revealed at all. Though I wouldn't have put it this way back then, I believe I was encountering something quite close to what we're calling fullness here in terms of how people interacted with each other and with the organization.

The second notable structural dynamic at Santropol Roulant was the boundarylessness of almost all groupings. While a given functional area or project may have had a core group of people who generally saw to it, other staff, volunteers, clients, board members, etc. frequently participated (at their own discretion) in such activities. This participation may have involved simply wandering through a meeting and making a few comments, or it may have manifested as a more sustained pattern of coming in and out of area/project activities. The organization as a whole was similarly open. Its core activities and clients were clearly defined, but it constantly made room for people who didn't fit existing organizational categories: a person who is anything but homebound wanders in off the streets and is offered a bite to eat and a place to sit quietly for a while; a volunteer who is not able to participate in meal preparation or delivery is able to explore other ways of

belonging; an organization that shares no tactical or strategic goals with Santropol Roulant becomes a kind of organizational companion or friend. Where most organizations draw boundaries, Santropol Roulant offered a sustained invitation. Again, in the language of this paper, Santropol Roulant consistently seemed to exhibit an intention toward oneness.

Are these, in fact, structural observations I am making? In that they deal with the transcendence of role and group boundaries, they may seem to have more to do with the absence of structure than with structure itself. We often associate structure with boundaries. The edges of a form are what seem to give it pattern coherence: the walls in a house, the county lines on a map. But there are other ways of thinking about structure, other intentional geometries, in fact, and one of these in particular opens up possibilities of organizational engagement that are unavailable in our typical, boundary-driven organizational shapes.

The Geometry of the Center

Centers Not Sides

William Isaacs (1999) writes about Dialogue in the tradition of Martin Buber and David Bohm. In this tradition, Dialogue is a collective conversational practice intended to help people move beyond their current assumptions in order to think together in a truly collective and creative way. Isaacs calls Dialogue “a conversation with a center but no sides.” He means that Dialogue doesn’t focus on bounding the conversation in order to achieve consensus. Instead, it creates a sense of shared meaning – a center – powerful enough to hold together any number of apparently diverse perspectives. Part of this practice is the search for connections between frames and belief systems that seem to contradict each other on the surface. Much of dialogue takes place in the conversational subsoil, the place where roots intertwine and common currents feed even the most disparate paradigms. What’s particularly interesting about Dialogue is that it is not just a way of making people feel connected. It has a generative power. Powerful new perspectives seem to spring unbidden from the simple act of suspending judgment and looking for points of contact in ideas that at first feel alien to us. And these perspectives often lead to tangible results – fresh ways of expressing ourselves, innovative projects, or novel modes of organizing.

Dialogue is one example of what we might think of as the geometry of the center, a geometry in which things are held together not because they are contained by borders or categories, but because they are all drawn to the same thing. It is a gravitational geometry, a geometry based on attraction.

Imagine an organization whose fundamental principle was the center not the side. What would this mean? What would it look like in practice? I’ll offer some possible perspectives, all of which make sense deductively and all of which can be seen empirically put into practice at a place like Santropol Roulant.

Let's start by defining a "center" as a focal point of interaction. A center is essentially an ongoing conversation. The conversation may appear to revolve around a typical function like accounting, or around a specific project or initiative. It may, however, be more subtle – grounded in a question that might not seem to have much to do with formal organizational goals. The "conversation" need not be explicitly articulated. It might be tacit and experiential. We don't need to be talking about cooking or accounting or community-building; we might simply be doing those things together in a sustained way. In fact, the Latin roots of the verb 'to converse' mean 'to live with' or 'to dwell among'. The shift of meaning to emphasizing speaking instead of living is relatively recent (Oxford English Dictionary).

Gravitational Structure

What differentiates a centered conversation from a bounded conversation? That is, how do we know that something like accounting is being structured via attraction rather than via typical role and group boundaries? We can deduce two key principles, which, not coincidentally, also map neatly onto oneness and fullness.

A center is infinitely radiant.

Each center exhibits field-like properties in that it is understood to affect and be affected by all bodies, no matter how far they might appear to be from that center. The force of a center extends endlessly in all directions, which is just another way of saying that, at the level of intention, no one is excluded from the conversation. In order to prevent the kind of social identity closure and comparison typically associated with groups, the center cannot fundamentally be understood as a group at all by the people visibly participating in it. No one is outside of the boundary of the conversation – even people who would not normally be considered part of the organization – because the conversation has no boundary. No one belongs to the conversation more than anyone else. This property has nothing to do with visible form. Perhaps only four or five people typically participate in the planning for a particular project or in a certain organizational function. But at the level of intention, each participant in the conversation understands that it affects everyone, even if only diffusely, and that everyone is a latent or potential participant. One day someone who has never indicated an interest in the project might ask a question, or offer an idea, or sit in on a meeting, or join an activity. Recognizing such latent participation is the intentional stance that allows a group to escape the social identity trap and to stay attuned to the underlying hum of interconnectedness or oneness that I have argued is an essential dimension of human engagement.

A center is perfectly gradient.

There are an infinite number of relative locations one can occupy with respect to a center. Again, the field-like metaphor fits nicely here. There are no discrete categories of participation in a field, no separate degrees of in or out. In organizations, this means that a person may locate herself at any "distance" from a conversational center. That is, she may invest as much or as little energy and attention in the thing as she sees fit. The more she invests, the "closer" she is to the center. This is a difficult structure to envision. Even

if we want a particular project or function to be open to everyone, we generally pre-define categories of participation. “You’re welcome to be a part of this initiative, but you must come to meetings twice a week, or agree to give a certain number of hours,” etc. Perhaps, if we are sophisticated, we offer several options for participation. But this is a far cry from the idea that a person may contribute in the manner she wants to and to the degree she sees fit. Such freedom is precisely what true fullness requires: organizational conversations that allow us to invoke the various parts of ourselves if, when, and how we are moved to. Fullness does not imply that we are *using* all dimensions of ourselves in every context; it merely implies that we have *access* to those dimensions, that we are not cut off from them.

Let’s call the principles of radiance and gradient gravitational principles. Gravity is radiant in that it excludes nothing. We live in a universe in which everything is attracted to everything. It is neither exaggerated nor in the least romantic to say that I have a relationship with even the most distant star. It is a scientific fact. And gravity is gradient. The degree of attraction one body has on another is inversely proportional to distance. Gravity is always at work, but the closer we are to something the more we feel it.

If these gravitational principles were fully imbued in an organization, conversational centers would become energy centers. The work being done around a given focus would create energy for the organization and nourish its participants. Why? Because conversational centers would be sustained as people were attracted to them. If the conversation were not feeding something important, people would simply move away from it. (I address the question of what would happen if no one wanted to be involved in a seemingly indispensable function below.) Much organizational interaction works in the opposite way; it drains those involved of their engagement and enthusiasm, leaving them tired and in need of re-charging from some other source. We can think about an energy center as essentially a vital and ongoing conversation, a place of mingled curiosities and interests, a place where self-expression turns into relationship. It might take time for the organization to develop the level of transparency necessary for people to be able to *see* what they are drawn toward. And it might take time for individuals to learn how to act gravitationally. We carry so many preexisting frames with us into our organizational lives that it might be difficult to move away from thinking about what we are supposed to do in order to think about what we want to do, what we feel called to do. But let’s assume for the moment that this habit can be cultivated, personally and organizationally.

One consequence of a gravitational approach would be that strategy and growth would be based on engagement rather than on opportunity assessment. The organization would grow where there was energy for growth, seeking to discover and nurture new energy centers. This would call for an intuitive rather than an analytical approach to development. What might make sense from a traditional strategic perspective might make no sense at all in terms of engagement. We might see the need for a new project or new strategic direction, but if there were no intrinsic human energy to support the project, either it would fail or it would succeed at the cost of engagement. A gravitational organization would need to learn how to pay attention to and develop the conversational centers that harbored enough latent energy to grow.

Comments on Network Structures

Given the relational freedom and the centered geometry of a gravitational structure, one might sensibly ask if what I am describing is simply a type of network organization. The study of social networks within and among organizations presents structure not as a pattern of formal or informal roles and groups but as a pattern of interlaced relationships among actors (Tichy 1981). Networks may have their hubs (centers) and can be partially or completely open. Are they then “unbound”? Are networks essentially engaging? I think not. A full discussion of network theory in organization studies would require another paper, but I’ll make a few brief comments on why networks, as they have come to be understood, exert constraints similar to those found in classical, formalized structures, and why gravitational structures are of a different order altogether.

Gravitational structures are field organized, networks are path organized. That is, gravitational structures assume at least a latent relationship between each element. Networks do involve direct relationships, but most relationships are indirect, mediated by other elements. To reach another element, one element may have to connect along a path through several other elements. This means that elements are defined/identified in the network in terms of their position, or in other words, their role. The role here is defined by the various capacities the actor has via her position in the network with respect to things like influence, resource flow, and communication (Powell and Smith-Doerr 1994). Power and status are gained by occupying privileged locations that either serve as hubs by connecting to a large number of other nodes or have singular access to certain spaces by bridging “structural holes” (Burt 1992; Powell and Smith-Doerr 1994; Burke 1997). As with any positional structure, identity plays a key part in defining/constraining individual behavior and relationship possibilities. In short, networks are role structures.

Networks are also group structures. Although networks may be entirely open conceptually, group boundaries play a central part in determining network structures in practice. The group is one of the chief concepts studied by network theorists (Parkhe, Wasserman et al. 2006). Group phenomena like density, clustering, membership criteria, and openness are important aspects of network structure (Tichy 1981).

Another important distinction between social networks and gravitational organization is that in social networks people are the nodes or centers and relationships connect one person to another, whereas in gravitational organizations *relationships* (or what we’ve called conversations) are the centers and people essentially connect one relationship to another. It is as if the dots and the lines in the schematic diagrams have been reversed. The distinction is not semantic. Social structures that are anchored by individuals will tend to be static since they rely for structure on social position, meaning that people will be defined through their social and role identities. The social network, in fact, is a powerful mode of developing us/them distinctions as, for example, in social movements (Lamont and Molnar 2002). Most network scholars have adopted a substantialist understanding of network dynamics (anchored in the elements of the network) rather than a relational understanding, though there are exceptions (Emirbayer 1997).

Overall, network roles and groups do not tend to be particularly fluid. They show considerable inertia (Kim, Oh et al. 2006; Parkhe, Wasserman et al. 2006), suggesting that networks are, to a large degree, boundary-defined structures. In terms of identity effects they may differ little from hierarchical structures. In fact there is a debate in the literature as to whether a network is actually a unique class of social structure at all or whether it is simply a hybrid of market and hierarchical structures (Borgatti and Foster 2003).

Gravitational Structure in Practice

All of this sounds painfully abstract, no doubt, and it makes the gravitational ideal type appear farfetched. Whether we are in hierarchical or network organizations, our very sense of who we are in the world seems to have been constructed by hemming ourselves in in terms of the various roles we occupy and the affinity groups we belong to. Is it then really possible to work together in the un-bound manner I have described? Bluntly, I think the answer is yes – maybe not perfectly, maybe not without failure at times, but in essence, yes. At Santropol Roulant, as I said, the two dynamics that seem to shape the organization at a fundamental level are the focus on people as whole humans beings, not roles or parts, and the generally invitational nature that seems to infuse groups there, from the smallest working group to the organization as a whole. These dynamics translate structurally into something very like radiance and gradience.

The place is not utopian. It has its stresses and failures. Nor is it completely role-less and group-less. It is simply that roles and groups don't have the organizing, binding force that they do in most organizations. They seem merely to be temporary conveniences and are rarely confused with the more fundamentally open, relational energy that gives the organization its deepest coherence. People wander into the organization and through each other's workdays in unpredictable ways. Sometimes these encounters are small and incidental. Perhaps the graphic designer walks through the kitchen and stops to chat with someone peeling vegetables. Perhaps a volunteer overhears a fundraising conversation and sits down to take it in and even contribute ideas. Sometimes, however, the unlikely encounters generated at Santropol Roulant result in major new projects or even organizational realignments of various kinds. People don't necessarily identify strongly with their particular functions. They frequently get involved in other parts of the organization, and indeed, often change roles entirely. It is not uncommon for a staff member to shift roles two or three times before leaving (and this is within an organization with a staff of only a dozen). And volunteers shift their "roles" even more frequently.

In terms of group identities, the same kind of openness prevails. Group relationships are strong, but ever-changing since they are not closed or cliquish. People participate in groups, but they don't identify with them, since they are so permeable. Overall identification with the organization as a whole also appears to be quite low. People don't think about themselves as "Santropol Roulanters" (or in any similar way). Turnover is quite high, suggesting that people don't anchor their fundamental sense of who they are in their belonging to this particular organization. They will describe the organization in

general terms as a wonderful and special place, but they almost never talk about the people there in terms of homogeneity. You would be hard pressed to get someone there to give you a description of a typical member of the organization in anything but the most general terms (e.g., “caring”). And though there is clearly the sense that the organization is different from other organizations, most people are extremely reluctant to say anything negative about people in other organizations. I won’t go so far as to claim that no Social Identity effects occur there. But again, they do not seem to dominate in any meaningful way.

One objection to this gravitational approach to structure might be that even if it works, it might only be appropriate for certain types of organizations – perhaps small organizations or nonprofits, etc. Organizations like Semco (Semler 1989; 2003) in Brazil, however, suggest otherwise. With several thousand employees and sales on the order of \$200 million, Semco too pursues work with an unusual lack of boundaries and is renowned for being a highly engaging place. Working hours are completely self-determined (or cooperatively determined when necessary). Salaries can be self-set. People are given ample room to develop aspects of themselves not directly related to the company. There is little emphasis on formal definitions of roles or policies. And while perhaps groups are not as open as they are at Santropol Roulant, the organization is unusually transparent, with open meetings, rotating CEOs, and the frequent habit of aligning itself with unusual organizational partners.

W. L. Gore, a \$2 billion fluouropolymer manufacturer, has structured itself almost entirely without roles (Shipper and Manz 1992). Each person there is an “associate” and may at times serve as a “sponsor,” helping guide or orient associates. A sponsor is not a permanent state but a role any associate may adopt at a given time. Work is largely self determined, based on four simple principles:

1. Try to be fair.
2. Use your freedom to grow.
3. Make your own commitments and keep them.
4. Consult with other associates prior to any action that may adversely affect the reputation or financial stability of the company.

The commitment to the freedom implied in these principles is not superficial. One employee described the difficulty she had in figuring out exactly what to *do*.

I was waiting for a memo or something, or a job description. Finally after another month I was so frustrated, I felt what have I gotten myself into? I went to my sponsor and said, “What the heck do you want from me? I need something from you.” And he said, “If you don’t know what you’re supposed to do, examine your commitments and opportunities.” (Shipper and Manz 1992: 57)

Again, this is not an empirical paper, so I won’t go into these organizations in detail. But it is important not to dismiss the themes I’ve outlined as applicable only in very limited contexts. If, in fact, these are the themes at the root of human engagement, then they

should be true, in some fashion or other, for any organization that genuinely seeks to foster such engagement.

Another objection to the geometry of the center might be that, because of its lack of closure and its emphasis on self-expression, a gravitational structure will produce at best an inefficient, poorly coordinated muddle. The experiences of organizations like Santropol Roulant and Semco say otherwise. In terms of coordination, the thing to keep in mind is that a gravitational structure (in fact any kind of social or organizational structure) is rooted primarily in relationships. Self-expression occurs through these relationships, not apart from them. The practical effect of this dynamic is that people deal with coordination issues in very commonsensical ways. At Semco, as I said, people are free to make their own schedules. This freedom is not just glorified flex-time. If someone wants to work at 3:00 AM, or take a particular Thursday (or every Thursday) off, she is welcome to do so. However, people are also responsible for the success and coordination of their own projects, and this invariably means adjusting to other people's schedules, not in a prescribed bureaucratic way, but in a mutual, contextual way (again, think of Mintzberg's "mutual adjustment" mechanism). Things work similarly at Santropol Roulant. People move about freely, but check in with each other regularly.

When thinking about functional coordination, the question of onerous tasks also arises. If people are free to define the level and nature of their participation in various conversations (and associated activities), who will take out the trash? As people find themselves deeply engaged with each other and with the organization as a whole, they seem to figure this out for themselves. The trash gets taken out. In fact sometimes it is quite pleasant to take out the trash (when no one is forcing you to) after you have been staring at a computer screen all day. Once I observed Daniel, Santropol Roulant's translator-in-residence, walk away from his computer, pick up a broom, and spend the next 20 minutes sweeping. There was no schedule for this. It was not simply his turn in some kind of rotation. He just decided to do it. He looked very peaceful with that broom. Whether he swept because he was bothered by the dirt or because he wanted to do something physical for a while, who can say? Either way, the floor got cleaned.

A deeper objection to what I have proposed might be that focusing to such a high degree on self-expression and self-exploration might lead to a narcissistic and ultimately stagnant culture. Is a gravitational approach so focused on process that nothing ends up getting done? Is it so inward looking that it impedes innovation? There are two things to keep in mind with respect to this issue. First, as I have described it (and as I have seen it), a gravitational approach is not, in fact, particularly process-focused if by process-focused we mean spending a great deal of time trying to explore and articulate relational processes outside of particular contexts. Building relationships among "whole persons" does not necessarily mean *talking* about "whole persons." Nor does it mean talking about "relationships" in the abstract. It does mean paying close attention to the relationships that are at work in any given context. But such attention is often tacit and it actually leads to a contextual awareness that facilitates energetic and efficient "doing." Secondly, narcissism entails an obsessive focus on the self (particularly self-image). So organizational narcissism would entail an obsessive focus on the organizational self. But

a gravitational organization has no self in the sense of a fixed organizational identity. If it is impossible to say who is inside of the organization and who is outside of it, and if relationships and activity patterns shift according to the specific people who are involved in them, then the organization will not be locked into specific identity boundaries, and it can consequently become extremely fertile ground for innovation.

The experiences of organizations like Santropol Roulant and Semco suggest that it is possible to organize via emergent relational centers rather than via role and group identities. Identity processes don't disappear, of course, but they cease to be the central organizing force. What is at work here is a different kind of structuring, one that turns out to be both radically engaging and profoundly creative.

Introducing Implicate Structure

Now that I've exhausted dozens of pages (and likely the reader) in order to introduce an alternative structural geometry, I will risk the reader's resentment by making the claim that in terms of radical engagement, structure, as we normally understand the term, doesn't really matter. What follows might seem like a long and abstract digression, but I believe that for anyone who truly wants to put some of these ideas into practice, it is the most important section of this paper.

Typically, scholars who study social structures focus on discernable patterns in social *forms*. By 'forms' I mean things that are external to personal, qualitative experience. As mentioned above, the forms of social structure most frequently studied include task segmentation, group segmentation, decision-making authority, information flow, behavioral routines, and cultural symbols. These forms certainly have an effect on our qualitative experience of life, but they themselves are not that experience. This is easy to see when we consider that the same form might have quite a different effect on us at different times. One day the fact that our boss is responsible for strategic decisions might reassure us and make us feel safe, the next day it might make us feel irritated and constrained. At a given time in our life, we might cherish certain social routines or customs (e.g., going to church or wearing a tie), and at another time those same routines and customs might leave us feeling robotic and inauthentic.

It is natural for us to associate structure with form rather than qualitative experience. We don't normally think of our qualitative experiences as structural at all. We think of form in terms of how things look to us, and our experience in terms of how things feel. But insofar as qualitative experiences can be cast into patterns, they do indeed have a structural quality. This type of structure is more easily grasped if we consider the following question: What is the structure of a loving relationship?

Try to describe a loving relationship in form. Try to tell someone what it looks like. It is impossible to do. The forms that a loving relationship might take are infinite. It might be loud, it might be quiet. It might be funny, it might be serious. The people involved might live together or apart. We may feel safe in generally excluding certain kinds of visible behaviors; we might reject the idea that inflicting physical pain on someone could be

loving (although, if you re-set my dislocated shoulder, I might consider this both a loving and an extremely painful act). But few of us would presume to prescribe what a loving relationship *must* look like on the surface. Should we do so, we are likely to find a counterexample to our prescription soon enough. A loving relationship is primarily a matter of stance. We experience love and then we create forms of interaction to express that love in any given moment or context.

Despite its essentially formless nature, however, a loving relationship *is* structural. There is an underlying rule, a kind of intention that leads to a relatively stable pattern over time. The pattern here is one of qualitative experience, but it is a pattern nonetheless. We can experience love consistently and come to rely on it. It may be hard to say exactly *what* is consistent here. The pattern we are relying on is not a pattern of form. It is not even a pattern of surface emotions, as our feelings of happiness, sadness, attraction, enthusiasm, worry, etc. are likely to vary substantially over the course of a loving relationship. Nevertheless, we can recognize that the relationship has a persistent fundamental quality. It has a pattern. I'll borrow a concept from physicist David Bohm (1980) and call this type of qualitative pattern *implicate* structure, contrasting it with the *explicate* structure of a pattern rooted in form.³ The following definitions summarize the explicate/implicate distinction as I've adapted it for the purposes of this discussion:

Explicate Structure – Persistent patterns of relationship as they manifest in *form*. One important feature of forms is that they can be abstracted from individual experience, and it is precisely this abstraction that we usually associate with structure. Such abstraction is easy to see in the case of decision-making roles, for example (managers, vice presidents, etc.). But even more interpretive structural features like norms are essentially abstractions. The cultural belief in the moral value of hard work, say, might involve both subjective feelings and subjective interpretations (with considerable latitude). Nonetheless, its structural import is that it is not defined by the individual experience of hard work, but by a collective stance toward *the idea* of hard work. We are not as interested in what hard work feels like to someone working as we are in what it means. Note that explicate forms are not necessarily “formal” or explicit. They do not have to be encoded in words or policies. Suppose I always defer to you in terms of major decisions. This relationship dynamic might be entirely informal, even unacknowledged. But again, the repetition here – the pattern – is of an outward, behavioral feature. The pattern is in my deference to you, not in how I experience that deference. In fact my actual, qualitative experience of this deference might be wildly unstructured,

³ Bohm develops his notions of explicate and implicate order from some of the fundamental principles of quantum physics. Explicate order is the discrete order of the perceivable universe in which objects are differentiated. Implicate order is an underlying, undifferentiated “enfolded” order that is essentially unitary. Explicate forms rise out of implicate wholeness in much the way that waves rise out of a body of water. “Wholeness is what is real, and . . . fragmentation is the response of this whole to man’s action, guided by illusory perception, which shaped by fragmentary thought . . . All our different ways of thinking are to be considered as different ways of looking at the one reality, each with some domain in which it is clear and adequate” (7-8).

un-patterned. I might experience it as reassuring guidance one minute and servitude the next.

Implicate Structure – Persistent patterns of relationship as they are *experienced*. The quality of the relationship is the focus here, and that can only be defined internally by the way that the people in the relationship experience it. The experiences in question should not be confused with superficial emotional patterns. Implicate structure is rooted in deeper, intuitive *states* such as love, creativity, engagement, etc. I'll define 'state' here as an experiential, intuited pattern of feeling that is not dependent on forms or emotions. When we say we love someone, we are naming a pattern or consistency in our stance toward that person. As discussed, this stance is not grounded in the varying forms that the relationship will take over time. But neither is it really grounded in emotion, since while I may always perceive myself as loving my wife, I certainly do not feel the same emotions toward her from one minute to the next. I might be happy, sad, enthusiastic, irritated, etc., and yet I still recognize an underlying, deep consistency in the way I experience my relationship with her. (One could say the same thing about a feeling of sustained relational creativity or engagement.) Since a social structure involves widely shared relationship patterns that persist across time and space, relational states become structural when they exhibit a consistency (always imperfect) from person to person and when they can be communicated or transmitted across time and space boundaries. Why do I say that emotional patterns are not part of implicate structure? We can certainly talk about shared emotional patterns that are structural. For example, fans of a sports team share predictable highs (wins) and lows (defeats). But the reason that these emotions are shared and structural is that they are provoked by very specific forms - team names, uniforms, an ideology (a set of words and beliefs) around winning and losing, very rigid sets of rules and policies (game rules, league structures), etc. There are, of course, more pernicious forms of emotional structuring, such as fascism, xenophobia, racial supremacy movements, etc. But the point is that emotion can only be structured in the social sense via an interaction with very rigid forms. In other words, emotional structure is a part of *explicate* structure. Implicate structure, as I am defining it here, is form-independent. It uses forms to express itself, but the intuitive state gives rise to the forms, not the reverse.

The connection between implicate structure and engagement is obvious. If we are interested in engaging organizations then we must think in terms of implicate structure. Engagement is an experiential state of feeling connected and present; it may exist in many forms and may be accompanied by many emotions. While some visible forms may, over time, seem to be more frequently found in engaging organizations, enough counterexamples can always be found that the experience of engagement is not essentially locked in those forms. This is not a comforting truth. It is easy to change organizational forms. It is easy to make them consistent. But it is far from easy to change implicate patterns, or even to know what they are or how one might access them.

We can start by understanding that, insofar as it results in engagement, gravitational structure is implicate. It is a matter of intention not form. A gravitational organization has two fundamental intentions:

- That people have room to express themselves fully and interact as whole persons.
- That no one be excluded by definition from any conversational center (function, project, inquiry, etc.) that has arisen.

It is just as impossible to prescribe the specific form that these intentions will take as it is to prescribe the form of a loving relationship. (And for a very good reason, since in the end loving relationships – with the self and with others – are exactly what we are talking about here.) It is quite possible for an organization to look gravitational at the explicate level but be rigidly role-bound and group-bound at the experiential level. We may abolish roles, set up open committees, allow people to work on whatever they want to whenever they want to, etc. But if our moment-to-moment intentions toward each other do not match these forms, our experience of the organization will not be engaging. If I see you primarily as an accountant and relate to you as such, it doesn't matter whether or not you have the title or the job description. If I resent the fact that the building porter is asking questions about sales, it doesn't matter that all of our sales meetings are technically "open." It is also possible, if rare, for the organization to look very boundary-structured on the surface but to be essentially gravitational at the implicate level. We may have many roles and rules, but if we do not interact with each other primarily via those roles and rules, our experiences of our work may well be deeply engaging. We can surmise that over time, explicate structure is likely to mimic implicate structure, but that doesn't mean we can create an implicate structure by starting with an explicate shift any more than we make ourselves fall in love by buying someone boxes of candy and greeting cards.

The stability, the coherence, of a radically engaging organization must arise from its stability of intention. This doesn't mean that there will be no stability of form. For example, Santropol Roulant, throughout most of its history, has cooked and delivered meals six days a week according to a very rigorous schedule. A morning shift begins preparing the meals at 9:30 AM. An afternoon shift finishes and packs the meals at 1:00 PM. And people are off on their delivery routes at 3:00 PM. But there is a clear sense in the organization that these shifts and this schedule are arising out of the overall intention of connection and engagement. Insofar as the schedule and approach continue to nourish that sense of engagement – among staff, volunteers, and clients – it makes no sense to alter it. Deciding that out of some misplaced commitment to formlessness the schedule should be altered every day would be just as absurd as an overreaching commitment to keeping the schedule the way it is whatever happens.

Forms can often be quite subtle. For example, in an effort to avoid organizational patterns of domination, some feminist organizations adopted what they called a 'structureless' approach in which roles might temporarily be assigned by lots or rotated regularly to include everyone. Initially engaging, these approaches led to fragmentation and energy dissipation over time (Calas and Smircich 1996). Such a focus on form – even a flexible, rotating form – is counter to the principle of gravitational alignment, a principle that

allows each person to locate herself in the organizational universe wherever seems most appropriate to her at any given time. If this principle leads to someone's occupying the same apparent, formal position for 20 years, so be it. The key difference between an implicate, gravitational structure and an explicate "structureless" structure, is that the gravitational organization does not *force* form to shift. Instead, it is constantly attuned to the *possibility* that form will need to shift if energy changes.

In fact, that's exactly what happened at Santropol Roulant recently. The organization has been increasingly taken up with the question of dissemination: how it might share its experience and wisdom with other organizations. This was not a particular concern in the early years, but as the organization matures, it is being asked more frequently to help with other kinds of projects, movements, and organizations. As people at Santropol Roulant became more comfortable with the idea of sharing their work with the outside world, they also began to feel the need for more time to reflect together about the meaning of their work and how best they might share it. They realized that the rigorous schedule, previously a source of energy, was now impeding their ability to connect with each other and with their own ideas. So simply, but dramatically, they changed the schedule, moving from six days of delivery to five, with double meals being delivered on Wednesday. (This was not done without a great deal of conversation with clients, of course). This freed up Thursdays from any cooking or delivery needs, and now each Thursday is devoted to a mixture of shared reflection around various themes and individual time in which people can pursue whatever projects they need space for. Few organizations would have the courage to simply shut down operations for an entire day a week. But for Santropol Roulant, even drastic formal changes like this can be broached when it becomes clear that people need a different kind of form in which to express their energies and connections to each other.

In summary, a spiritual architecture is an implicate architecture. Explicate forms may serve as reminders, clues, enablers, etc. (for example, egalitarian organizational structures can mitigate some of the inter-group comparison dynamic associated with Social Identity Theory (Joshi 2006)), but the moment we come to rely on them, we are likely to lose our way. Implicate structures based on gravitational intentions can offer the kind of boundarylessness necessary for engagement while still creating organizational forms in which we can work together in specific, personal, context-appropriate ways. On the one hand, a gravitational organization will look as if it is composed of many different relationship configurations, each with its own focal point or energy center. On the other hand, since each configuration is unbound and all-inclusive at the level of intention, the organization can be seen as a unified relational field. Each energy center then is not a separate thing, but simply a perspective, a vantage point from which to see and experience that field. And insofar as the energy centers extend infinitely beyond what we would normally understand as the organization's own boundaries, the organization itself can be seen as simply another perspective or vantage point on a much larger, all-inclusive, universal relational field. Heady and even mystical in theory, but fairly simple in practice. Rooted in the smallest moments of personal expression and relational connection, a gravitational structure grows naturally out of the interaction between passion and compassion.

III. Meaning Unbound

Organizational Purpose

Let us briefly return to Mitroff's study of executive attitudes toward spirituality. We've talked about two kinds of connection highlighted in that study: connection to the self (fullness) and connection to everyone else (oneness). But there is a third sort of connection almost universally seen by Mitroff's interviewees as spiritually important: connection to a larger sense of purpose or meaning. To invoke the spiritual dimension of life is to pursue the 'why'. This pursuit need not be closed, or even explicit. In fact, Mitroff's participants described their own sense of purpose in very general, diffuse ways. They seemed to be more interested in purpose as an intuitive feeling or experience than as an abstract, articulated idea. Nevertheless, from Mitroff's perspective, one can't engage with the spiritual without engaging with purpose, or again, as Tillich puts it, with "what matters most."

'Purpose' is also a foundational element of most definitions of organization. Organizations are role systems, but what differentiates organizations from other kinds of role systems like families, tribes, or communities, is that organizations have a particular purpose. They exist in order to *do* something. Many, probably most, organizations treat this sense of purpose as synonymous with whatever the organization produces: "Our purpose is to make ball bearings." Purpose here is functional, with no particular connection to deeper, more foundational values. To the degree that the organization identifies with and instrumentalizes people toward this limited "purpose" to the exclusion of any broader sense of meaning, it will be only superficially engaging at best, if Mitroff's respondents are correct.

Other organizations, however, do understand themselves as participating in broader fields of meaning creation. Social sector organizations, of course, generally see themselves as trying to express particular values in the world. But businesses can also see themselves as change agents for particular values. These values might be focused on the people within the business: "Let's create a work environment where people can learn and grow and enjoy themselves." If these internal values are not merely instrumental, designed to increase profits, but also seen as good in and of themselves, then that business is at least provisionally concerning itself with meaning. Similarly, the values of the business might be externally focused – framed in terms of society at large: "Let's create a world in which everyone can communicate with everyone via low-cost, accessible technology." If that stance is simply part of a marketing strategy, it is not values-based, but insofar as it is seen by organization members as meaningful in and of itself (i.e., "We believe this would be a good thing to do, even if our organization didn't exist."), it can be said to be values-based. Government agencies too, qua organizations, can often see themselves as meaning agents and not just instrumental deliverers of administrative services. So although the organizations that most explicitly wrestle with meaning are generally found in the social sector, any type of organization can be meaning-driven, at least theoretically. For the

purposes of the following discussion, we'll classify any such meaning-driven organization as a 'social change organization'.

If we continue to define "spirit" in the broadest possible way, then it is fair to say that social change organizations are all working, in one way or another, to create a more spiritual world, a world that aligns more closely with the human spirit. Social change organizations, whether they know it or not, seek radical engagement at the societal level. However, the way they typically understand themselves to be fostering their specific missions often directly contradicts the principles of fullness and oneness. If those principles are correct, then most social change efforts are ultimately incoherent. Overcoming this incoherence requires both a different way of thinking about purpose and a different way of understanding the organization's role in pursuit of that purpose.

Disengagement as Incoherence

Early in my community development career, I went to work for a nonprofit organization in Baltimore called South East Community Organization (SECO). SECO was a typical full-service community development corporation with a 20-year track record of success. It offered services like literacy training and employment counseling, managed real estate and economic development projects, and served as a general advocacy and organizing catalyst for its 80,000-person catchment area in southeast Baltimore. By most measures, it was a relatively healthy organization with political legitimacy and a stable budget, and I wouldn't describe my experience there as negative exactly. At the same, something never felt quite right to me. I was treated well. I was doing ostensibly meaningful work with people I liked. But the organization felt somewhat lifeless and mechanical, and I was never sure that our interactions with the community were making a great deal of difference.

If you had to describe SECO's mission generically it would be something like this:

- To make the community and political life of the area more democratic and participatory;
- To enable residents to develop themselves in meaningful, multi-dimensional ways through education, economic progress, and cultural activities;
- To create vital public spaces and events that would connect residents to each other more deeply and catalyze work, play, and celebration.

Most community development organizations have missions quite similar to SECO's.

In retrospect, one of the things that strikes me is how little aligned my experience inside of the organization was with the organization's external mission. While SECO had a collegial culture, I wouldn't describe it as democratic or participatory. The chain of command from the board to the executive director to the program directors to program staff to support staff was clear and traditional. Nor did the organization treat any of its members in a notably multi-dimensional way. We were acknowledged to be human beings, but not much energy was put into enriching our lives in ways that did not directly affect our work. And finally, we spent very little time connecting to each other let alone

celebrating such connections. An annual picnic and the occasional party were the extent of internal “vital public spaces and events.”

The approach the organization took to its staff – in other words, the approach we took to each other – was primarily instrumental. We were there not to live and experience the organization’s values but to serve them. There was no person or group to blame for this state of affairs. The board and the executive director experienced the same dynamics as everyone else. They too were instruments. The organization itself was an instrument. The question of how one could be expected to facilitate democracy or build community when one’s daily relationships with other people contained little of either was simply not asked. Nor is it asked by most social change organizations. The giving arrow tends to fly in only one direction, and we accept this, because the work seems so important, so noble. When you are trying to lift people from poverty or give voice to the voiceless, what can your own seemingly smaller problems and yearnings matter? The fact that this attitude might make us relationally incapable of putting the organization’s values into practice is seldom considered. In fact, such instrumentalism is the hallmark of modern social movements and their children, social change organizations.

Instrumentalism and Social Movements

The modern social movement first took root in the 18th century. As a form of intentional social and political change, it differed in several ways from the military, religious, and aristocratic change patterns the world had come to know. In particular, scholars focus on the fact that social movements involved collective contentious action that drew on a modular and portable repertoire of tools such as the barricade, the petition, the strike, the symbolic protest (e.g., effigy burning), and the street march (Tarrow 1994; Tilly 2004). Previously, social change techniques had been associated with particular groups or particular locations. They were unique or at least highly customized. With the development of new communication channels, change techniques spread, becoming more generic and abstract.

Two features of the movement-based approach to social change bear on our discussion. First, as Tarrow (1994) points out, movement tools in the repertoire were only effective if both sides understood their meanings and were able to respond to each other accordingly.

The repertoire is at once a structural and a cultural concept. Tilly’s “well-established actions” are not only what people do when they are engaged in conflict with others; it is what they know how to do and what others expect them to do. Had sit-ins been used by challengers in eighteenth-century France, their targets would not have known how to respond to them . . . (31)

In this light we can understand social movements as largely *role-playing* ventures, drawing on stylized, symbolic, “appropriate” groupings of activities that are understood both by those performing them and by those playing complementary roles (e.g., “unions” and “bosses”). Secondly, the tool repertoire grew to include organizational forms, not just specific protest tactics (Clemens 1996). Modes of organizing became abstract, portable,

and modular as well, evolving away from organic practices rooted in local cultures. The professionalization of social protest was one result (McAdam, McCarthy et al. 1996). From their early evolution, social movements have been largely instrumental, drawing on people and resources to carry out abstracted roles and activities in pursuit of the movement's ultimate change goals.

One can see this instrumentalism permeating the theoretical frames of the broader, more ambitious social change thinkers and activists of the mid-nineteenth through early twentieth century. Tarrow (1994), for example, traces out three lines of related framing.

1. Marx, who saw social change as essentially driven by the inherent fault lines in a given social structure. Structural contradictions lead people to act out the inevitable social collapse and reorganization. From this point of view, people are the instruments of social-structural forces.
2. Lenin, who believed that structural reorganization needed to be catalyzed by a vanguard of leaders. Here, leaders can be seen as instrumental with respect to larger change forces and goals, and the average movement participant is instrumental with respect to the leaders' interpretations of those forces and goals.
3. Gramsci, who argued that structure and leadership wouldn't provoke real change unless that change were grounded in culture. Culture was what ultimately moved people to act. Culture itself – the patterns of interaction and meaning that give us common ground – becomes instrumental from this perspective.

Returning now to the problem of incoherence, insofar as modern social change organizations have grown out of instrumental, contentious social movements, it is not surprising that the organization and the people involved in it are only considered in terms of their instrumental utility. Nor is it surprising that this approach tends to confound our change efforts. At best, we have social change organizations that feel mechanical and lifeless and have a difficult time sparking meaningful relationship shifts in their communities. At worst we have revolutions that preach equality and brotherhood as they send their opponents and eventually their own members to prison camps or the guillotine.

The answer to this dilemma may seem obvious: simply align the internal workings of your movement or organization more closely with your stated values. We can think of such alignment as organizational integrity. But integrity and coherence are not quite the same thing. Organizational integrity, when defined this way, is largely a matter of form: if you promote democracy, make your organization structurally democratic. Organizational coherence is a matter not of form but of intention or spirit: *if you promote democracy work to make even the slightest relationships you are in feel democratic*. We do have some examples of coherent social movements. Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. spring to mind. In fact, Gandhi's famous dictum is a personal version of social change coherence: "Be the change you want to see in the world." But I believe that such coherence is much harder than it sounds, because incoherence between organizational values and practices is merely a reflection of a deeper incoherence between the way purposes are framed and the general human yearning for fullness and oneness. To understand what coherence really involves, we have to explore more fully the manner in

which social change movements and organizations typically understand their missions and the contradictions with radical engagement that arise from those understandings.

Meaning and Function: The Problem of Fullness

A person is hungry. In a world trying its best to be compassionate, an organization springs up to feed that person. It is a noble purpose, and people cast themselves gladly into its pursuit. An organization as a purpose machine has a relentless ability to focus on a particular need. And it can achieve a great efficiency in meeting that need, particularly in a competitive environment, whether the competition be around sales or grants. But this focus and efficiency can have a peculiar effect on the people involved. The organization designed to feed people presumably wants to feed them in order that they be able to live full and meaningful lives. Feeding people is never, philosophically speaking, the ultimate concern. It is not rooted simply in biological necessity but in the (perhaps tacit) belief that individual life has dignity and meaning, and the ability of people to experience that dignity and pursue that meaning should not be restricted by things like malnutrition.

But when does the “person who is being fed” become the “Hungry Person”? When does a function create a role? Perhaps the role is not as explicit as “accountant” – call it a shadow role – but there is a very real sense in which the organization’s increasing focus on the problem of hunger creates people who are seen as, and may end up seeing themselves as, primarily “Hungry People” – not just people who happen to be hungry. The explicit values of the organization, of course, are likely to affirm each person’s wholeness and importance. But this affirmation may mean little, when almost all of the organization’s day-to-day energies, expressed in numberless encounters, transactions, policies, programs, rules, rituals, stories, and documents, are mediated by the central purpose or “need” that give rise to the organization in the first place. Organizations are single-minded. Consequently their relational vocabularies – the words, concepts, and overall frames through which they develop relationships – are almost always stunted, diminished. In an organization, we relate to each other through that one *thing* that gives the organization its apparent purpose, whether that purpose involves microchips or hunger. Everyone (every role) is instrumental to the organization’s purpose, even (perhaps especially) the customer or client who is being served. It doesn’t matter which side of the transaction we are on, in the end. We might be “Feeder” instead of the “Hungry Person.” We are all defining ourselves and each other in terms of the parts we play in the particularly narrow set of meanings through which the organization is framing the world.

When we are caught up organizational life, this narrowness seems like a sensible approach. We confront great challenges. We are pressed for time. We need to get things done. If a woman is starving to death, it seems to matter little that when she is not starving she likes to paint or that the man feeding her has a difficult relationship with his brother. It is particularly easy to ignore these things, to instrumentalize both people involved, when the organizational purpose is a noble one. Why shouldn’t we become “instruments” for great things – feeding, teaching, discovering, healing? If the first postulate of radical engagement holds, however – if we feel dispirited when we are cut

off from our own fullness – then it holds for any sort of narrowing, noble or mundane. And there are voices in the social sector who tell us just that. John McKnight (1995) is one of the most powerful. He argues that we need to move from the “servant” ideal that drives professionalized social services to the “friend” ideal at the root of all healthy community. “The use of human service tools places a person at risk of a reduced sense of self-worth, poverty, segregation from community life, and disempowerment as a citizen” (109).

Role restriction based on organizational purpose is different than the kind of internal specialization described in the previous section. Accounting is a function. Being hungry is not a function exactly, which is why I have called it a shadow role. But the overall principle is the same and the effect that the organization’s shadow role has on everyone involved is perhaps even deeper. The organization has chosen to concern itself with only a small part of the human experience – a particular and accidental circumstance. This is true not only of problem-solving organizations like food banks or drug rehabilitation centers. It is also true of organizations driven by a more developmental vision of society, for example schools. While the pursuit of learning may feel more expansive than the eradication of hunger, insofar as we only see people as students (and not just in a general sense, but from within the specific institutional framework in which we find ourselves) the same tendency to instrumentalize them to organizational purposes and to deny any part of them that does not fit those purposes seems to exist. Does this mean that it is impossible to work on a particular social issue in a truly engaging way? We’ll turn to that question shortly.

Meaning and Association: The Problem of Oneness

There are, of course, social change organizations that see themselves as serving the entire person, not just a given need or aspect. But instead of focusing on a particular dimension of a person they focus on a particular kind of person. Social change efforts have focused on class, occupation, gender, race and ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation among other things (Tilly 2004). The “new social movements” of the last few decades in particular focus on segmented identities and lifestyle issues more than on the traditional class identities and political/economic issues (though how “new” these types of movement are is a matter of dispute) (Polletta and Jasper 2001). Identity movements are meant to be omni-dimensional. While an organization or initiative might focus on a given issue (voting rights, equal access to employment, etc.), at root they are driven by an implicit vision of personal development and fulfillment for the category of people they serve.

Identity movements provoke the comparison and closure described by social identity theory. An identity movement starts out with a vision not of exclusion but of equality and inclusion. It seeks balance in an unbalanced world. It says, we have been left out - let us in. But the constant emphasis on group solidarity and differences with other groups can lead to a violation of the oneness principle and thus a profound sense of disengagement.

When successful, frames make a compelling case for the “injustice” of the condition and the likely effectiveness of collective “agency” in changing that condition. They also make clear the “identities” of the contenders, distinguishing “us” from “them” and depicting antagonists as human decision makers rather than impersonal forces such as urbanization. (Polletta and Jasper 2001: 291)

Similarly to the issue-focused perspectives described above, identity-focused perspectives would seem to leave us no room for radical engagement.

Patchwork and Utopia

The implication of the fullness/oneness paradigm seems, at first glance, to say that only movements and organizations that are about everything and for everyone can be truly engaging. By framing their claims in absolute terms, such universal social change efforts seem to avoid both issue-based and identity-based contradictions. I can think of three such frames:

1. Religious frames – rooted in some version of complete transcendental fulfillment. Open to, and often explicitly evangelizing toward, everyone.
2. Utopian frames – meant to establish earthly and or transcendental fulfillment via a prototype of a perfected social system. Again, while such frames may be given life in very small intentional communities, these communities are meant to serve as examples for everyone.
3. Systemic or revolutionary frames – focused on institutional change. While they may not operate specifically out of an idea of personal fullness, they are seeking to change the institutional parameters within which people live – presumably guided by a tacit sense of what it means to live a good, full life. Early revolutionary social movements (e.g., the French revolution) and modern environmental and anti-globalization movements might be seen in this way. All such movements, in theory if not in practice, seek to serve everyone – that is, their picture of institutional reform is generally couched in universalist terms.

In the end, however, these universal frames also end up being self-defeating in terms of engagement. They too fall into the identity trap. While they don't focus on any particular dimension or group, they have a subtler way of creating 'us' and 'them.' The dividing line is the frame itself. Do you believe it? Do you accept it wholeheartedly? Or do you have an alternative way of looking at things? Those who believe it are the in-group. Those who don't are the out-group. The social identity mechanism kicks in and we're right back where we started: disconnected from each other, disengaged from what matters most.

Where do these seemingly overwhelming contradictions leave us in terms of our social change efforts? If we want to have movements and organizations that wrestle with meaning, that try to explore healthy ways of reshaping the world, where can we turn?

Radical Expression

From Social Identity to Oneness

Let's consider an organization focused on a fairly small subset of the world – adults with developmental disabilities. The Planned Lifetime Advocacy Network (PLAN) was founded in 1989 as a response to several parents' growing discomfort with the institutional boundaries hemming in their adult children with developmental disabilities (Nilsson 2003). These parents were faced with the fact that their children were going to outlive them. They were becoming less and less comfortable with the idea that an array of social workers, psychiatrists, and advocates might one day be the only form of community that their children would have left. PLAN was formed to facilitate development of authentic, messy communities of relationship around the “people at the centre” as the sons and daughters came to be called.

The approach to social change of the people who founded PLAN was initially informed by their experience with public advocacy. Like many identity-based initiatives, their work had been framed in terms of rights for the particular group of people with whom they were concerned. They were the survivors of many political battles and were skilled at traditional forms of identity and inclusion debates, but now they wanted something different. Their success in these debates was in many ways responsible for the institutionalized, professionalized world in which their children now largely moved.

The first great epiphany that the parents had was that they needed to move beyond their protective, defensive stance and ask themselves, “What is it we really want for our children?” More simply, they asked, “What is a good life?”. This gentle question led PLAN to become one of the most creative and powerful social change organizations in Canada.

What is a good life? The question is more important than the answer. PLAN came to describe a good life in terms of financial security, home, relationships, and contribution. But what is signal here is not the particular collection of nouns, but the engagement with the ‘why.’ Why are we doing this work? At its root, what does it mean? PLAN had begun to reframe its work in terms of radical values. These values are radical in that they are at the root of the human (general) and the organizational (specific) experience. And they are radical because they suggest a profound change, a beautiful disruption of the world as we know it. Strikingly, the “client” identity has been transcended. An encounter with radical values always leads us to universals – if not universal truths, at least universal questions and experiments. PLAN's good life is not a good life just for people with developmental disabilities. It is a good life for us all. The organization in essence, if not in form, is serving everyone. (Interestingly, as PLAN grew more aware of the universal nature of its work, it developed an explicit organizational counterpart, *Philia*, to explore “good life” themes couched in terms of citizenship and inclusion from the perspective of society as a whole.)

PLAN is not special in this respect. Any identity-based organization can find at its center some version of ultimate meaning – the good life – that will infuse the organization's

work if it is allowed to. The effect of this infusion is that the power of the social identity mechanism is greatly weakened and in happy moments even transcended. This does not mean that the identity that has proved to be so resonant for the people involved (disability, race, gender, geography, interest) should be rejected. Instead it should be traveled through so profoundly that it becomes a doorway. I discover that at the core of my identity (my specificity) are the atoms that connect me to everyone else.

From Group Identity to Fullness

And what of issue-focused organizations? A similar possibility is open to us in them. I noted before that on the surface, issue-based organizations are for everyone. After all, everyone needs to eat, have a job, be educated, etc. The problem with issue-focused organizations is not that they contradict oneness, but that they contradict fullness. They provoke a narrow sort of interaction, similar to a rigid role dynamic. In such organizations, radical value mining will lead us to discover that the organization's mission does not, in fact, exclude the infinite dimensions of the self. Santropol Roulant, for example, is about food. It is about feeding hungry people who are disconnected from community. And yet the person who is hungry there never becomes just a "hungry person." Why not? Santropol Roulant manages the dizzying feat of simultaneously understanding food as a tangible thing and an ineffable truth. They make muffins so that people can eat them, but other things are eaten there as well. Any kind of hunger is important at the Roulant. Any opportunity to nourish is welcome.

At work here is a process of deep metaphor – not the kind of metaphor concerned with trivial similarities, but the kind of radical metaphor upon which everything depends. The Roulant is primarily interested in growing community and community can be fed in any number of ways. We all need physical nourishment, but we also need nourishment in other forms: psychological, creative, relational, spiritual, and so on. At the level of deep metaphor, any one human dimension or need is a symbol for every other dimension or need. In this way, fullness is met. Fiona delivers meals to Mr. Vinettzi. As is the way of the Roulant, they talk to each other not as server and client, but as, in fact, Fiona and Mr. Vinettzi. In doing so, they discover a shared love for making music. And soon, they are spending time together playing guitar and singing and exchanging songs that they have written. They make musical food for each other, and Mr. Vinettzi's regular supper is not disturbed by this. It sits on the table waiting its turn.

Organizational Poetry

At work here is a particular relationship with meaning. It is the poet's relationship, where accidents become universals. In each detail there is a wholeness. A specific identity invokes all identities. A specific function reveals all functions. This is not just fanciful language. Poets do not write fiction. The poet knows that the universe actually *is* contained in the blade of grass if you train yourself to look for it.

Paradoxically, this sort of contact with universals also avoids the ideology trap. The ideology trap occurs when the universal replaces the specific. I invest my version of the

“truth,” my system, with a false completeness and then use that truth to separate myself from the non-believers. Real human beings, real relationships are interesting to me only insofar as they exemplify my system. What we’re talking about here, however, at a Santropol Roulant or a PLAN, is a complete inversion of that dynamic. We start with real people in living contexts, and slowly (and always incompletely) come to the universal by discovering connections. The more radically we engage with an identity or need or task, the more we see its relationship to other identities needs and tasks. We come to understand it as an expression of something more fundamental. But we can see that our only way of continuing to access that fundamental thing is by being engaged in ongoing, living relationships, with ourselves and with each other. The truth here is anchored in the specifics of the day, the person, the encounter, even the identity.

Coherence Restored

A funny thing happens to an organization’s sense of mission when it begins to understand the radical, universal nature of its work. If that work is in fact an expression of some fundamental wholeness, if it is about everything and for everyone, then not only does my sense of what I’m doing change, but so does my sense of whom I’m doing it for. On the surface, I serve a given target group or client base, but if what I’m doing has meaning for everyone, in some sense, my “client” becomes anyone who walks in the door – staff, funders, neighbors, etc. You are my client, whoever you might be and, in fact, I am my client too. We have transcended the instrumentality paradigm, the giving arrow has become a giving field. I was talking to a Santropol Roulant volunteer once who told me that he often felt guilty when delivering meals. I asked him why, and he said it was because it was so clear to him that he was doing it for his own reasons – that he did it because of what he got out of it (relaxation, meeting people, getting out into the world in a way normally not available to him). To me this seemed to be a sign of great organizational health: a confusion around who was giving to whom. That kind of confusion is miraculous. We need more of it.

Imagine a school that sees itself as a nexus for learning and growth, not just for students, but for teachers, parents, trustees, neighbors, support staff, administrators, bus drivers. If this school pursues its radical values after all, it will find that they have something to do with creative multi-dimensional growth of human beings (fullness). Here is a place to develop one’s mind, to connect with history, to explore culture and politics, to engage in music and art, to play. But how closed this energy feels, how diminished, when it is aimed at a subset of the community, and when the rest of the community is simply the instrument for delivering it. If, instead, every relationship in the school is meant to express, however imperfectly, a learning/ teaching dynamic for everyone involved, what could be more fruitful? What could be more efficient? What could be more engaging? We have recognized the fullness at the heart of this work. We have recognized the oneness in terms of whom it is for. We still look like a school. Nothing at first may be visibly different. But the thing feels entirely new and has entirely new social change effects. The school has become a place where everyone is not only a learner but a teacher. And teaching, for 5 year olds as much as for chaired professors, is the profoundest way of

learning and perhaps of building community itself. Such a school, such an organization, would be radically coherent.

To take another non-obvious example, imagine an environmental organization that pursues this course. What are its radical values? How can it work toward coherence? Superficially, we might default to an integrity model where the environmental organization uses low energy florescent light bulbs and recycles its office paper, but these are explicate reflections of its surface values, not implicate reflections of its radical values. What does an environmental organization ultimately want? It wants a sustainable relationship between our planet and ourselves. Any healthy ecology has two key dynamics. First, everything is interconnected and those interconnections are honored and cultivated even though we can't possibly understand all of their implications and effects. Waste equals food, as William McDonough says. The output of any given life is the input of other lives. This is, in fact, the principle of oneness at work. What would it mean in an organization? It would mean that role and group boundaries were permeable, that there were countless possibilities for interaction, that the strange encounter was cultivated.

The second key dynamic of ecology is diversity. Resilience and the capacity for adaptive innovation require myriad forms of life. Ecologists understand the value of the beetle and the spotted owl. They know that these unlikely creatures play important roles in the system even though we might not be perfectly clear as to what those roles actually entail. A sustainable organization, too, cultivates diversity, not simply as a visible mix of races or professions, but as a radical wildness filled with peculiar creatures: us. Our real diversity is only apparent and useful when there is room for all of the different quirks and characteristics that make each of us in a manner of speaking our own species. A sustainable organization knows that the grumpy old man in the basement office who has been there since 1972 has value even if that value is not easily apparent. This is the principle of fullness, that every part of every one of us matters. Once again, we have discovered that, at its radical heart, this particular social change organization is about everything and everyone. And, again, the specific contextual embodiment of these principles – in this case an environmental organization – offers us a very pleasing prospect.

Expressive Change

The organization as it seeks radical coherence begins to develop a new way of pursuing its social change mission. I have described the typical social change approach as instrumental. The people involved and the organization as a whole are seen as instruments for effecting change. They are important and interesting only insofar as they move us towards this change goal. They bear no more relationship to the goal than a car does to the city it takes you to. Instrumental approaches to change work quite naturally at the explicate level of form. They can be used to provide services or change behaviors, processes, laws, and articulated belief systems of various types. But social change efforts interested in systemic change need to go beyond the level of form and work to change fundamental relationship patterns. After all, society *is* essentially a relationship pattern. If you want to teach a child to be compassionate towards others, you have to start by being

compassionate toward the child. You can discuss compassion, give rational reasons for it, refer to examples of it, describe how it works, but if in the meantime you exhibit no compassion yourself, you are unlikely to help the child become compassionate. Relationships teach relationships.

The social change organization that rejects the instrumental approach and cultivates the kind of relational coherence I have described can be thought of as an *expressive* organization. Similarly a social movement with an approach rooted in coherence can be thought of as an expressive movement. The word ‘expressive’ here has several meanings:

- The organization is an expression of the relationship pattern it is trying to nurture in the world. While it may have objectives related to specific policies, public awareness, various metrics, etc., it is those objectives that are instrumental, not the organization itself. The organization is seen as a living community in which, however haltingly and imperfectly, the overall change “mission” is meant to be realized on a daily basis in the present.
- Each relationship within the organization expresses this foundational relational pattern. Just as the organization as a whole is not instrumental, no relationship within it is instrumental. This is the fractal geometry typical of complex adaptive systems, a holographic structure in which at any level or from any perspective the relational structure looks the same. So, an expressive organization will try its best to live its radical values in every encounter. Every relationship would be seen as equally important in this respect. The minimum number of people for this relationship pattern to be invoked is two. Two is where relationships begin. It is the atom of organization. Any combination of staff, clients/customers, suppliers, funders, volunteers, board members, neighbors, etc. is understood to be the whole social system in microcosm. Similarly the organization is holographic at any level of analysis. What is true of individual and group relationships within the organization is also true at the interorganizational level.
- The organization’s understanding of its own purpose, no matter how narrowly defined on the surface, is seen as expressive of more essential, universal meanings (disability advocacy becomes the pursuit of the “good life”; food becomes nourishment becomes community becomes fullness and oneness, etc.).
- The organization is understood to be a fertile ground for self-expression. One of its primary goals is to create a kind of relational space in which individuals can develop themselves. Each person’s development is idiosyncratic and the organization makes room for this.

What can we say about the dynamics of expressive change? The stance towards the organization and person is clearly different than the more typical instrumental stance. But how does this stance lead to change and what sort of change does it create? In detail, that is a topic for another paper. But we can briefly sketch out a few ways of describing expressive change that make logical and intuitive sense.

Radiant. Expressive change would be omni-directional. The change would spread in full through each relationship. Instrumental change, in contrast, is linear, targeted. Each relationship plays its part in moving the system along a given line toward a particular goal.

Inter-organizationally holistic. The collaborative dynamic between organizations would mirror the engaging relationship dynamic between individuals. Organizations would interact with each other as “whole organizations,” each with its own personality, its own sense of development. The primary collaborative pattern in expressive change would involve not instrumental, narrow, interest based coalitions, networks, roundtables, etc., but communities of organizations relating in all sorts of ways from fleeting engagement to long-term companionship.

Unmediated. Personal and inter-organizational relationships would not be mediated through leadership. An expressive organization would have what Thomas Pettzinger calls a large “surface area” (1999). Most, if not all, of the organization’s members would be in contact with other organizations in various rich ways.

Dialogic. Meaning frames would not compete for dominance. They would interact with each other with a goal of generating new, broader, shared perspectives. This, in fact, is Dialogue at the macro-level, a societal conversation large enough to hold different perspectives together, not through narrow consensus-building, but through discovering connections at a more profound level, connections that are deep enough to hold together apparently diverse interpretations of the world. If one of the difficulties faced when confronting institutional change is that our previous mental models interfere with our ability to consider alternatives, then Dialogue offers a way to set those models aside, if only temporarily, in order to consider new perspectives. Interestingly, this dialogic interaction of meanings both builds off of and offers an alternative to much of the work of current social change theorists. The exploration of “framing processes” is becoming more prevalent in the literature on social movements (Benford and Snow 2000). Much of the literature conceives of institutional change as occurring via a process of competition and negotiation among various frames. Hensmans (2003) explicitly connects social movement theory with institutional strategy, seeing such strategy as driven by “ideological actors” contesting various “sense-making possibilities in a field” and attempting to “maintain or gain the power to organize” these “archetypical possibilities.” While Hensmans demonstrates that social movement theory provides a useful set of analogies for understanding institutional change strategies, he suffers from the same narrowness found in more conventional institutional strategy literature. That is, he still largely assumes that individual actors are aware of their own explanations or frames and are capable of using them in a kind of “combat.” Dialogue, on the other hand, does not assume that individual frames are apparent; it assumes that these frames will gradually

emerge through shared conversation. And it does not assume competition among frames. Instead, it assumes that deeper understandings and richer generative energies are created when various frames interact, when they “cooperate,” as it were, to develop a shared (though not univocal) sense of meaning.

The above is just a preliminary sketch of some of the possible features of expressive change. I’ve arrived at these features deductively, but field research that explored expressive organizations and movements might be able to answer more fundamental questions about the dynamics, impact, and ultimate effectiveness of expressive change as it compares to instrumental change. The change approach known as Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider 1986; Cooperrider and Srivastava 1987; Cooperrider and Whitney 2002; Morris and Schiller 2003) might be one example of a very deliberate, essentially expressive process that is currently being used in a number of organizational and community settings. Appreciative Inquiry essentially creates institutional change by having people work with each other to discover and nurture root-level relational patterns that are, using the framework of this paper, radically engaging. It has achieved notable success in altering recalcitrant institutional patterns. There are undoubtedly other field contexts in which something like an expressive approach is implicitly being used, either for internal organizational development or for broader social initiatives. The work that naturally follows from this paper is the work of identifying and mining such contexts to give some inductive heft to the rather elaborate deductive framework I have developed here.

IV. The Unbinding

The literary critic Harold Bloom describes American poetry after Emerson as being held together by a shared stance: “Everything that can be broken should be broken” (1977). I think this is a helpful stance, even a holy one. Bloom admiringly calls it “Gnostic,” which I take to involve not just suspicion of but disbelief in anything material, worldly, transitory. The powerful ‘should’ in the sentence tells us that we are being distracted from what is true by all of the various breakable forms that populate the world. And so the breaking becomes a sacred effort. The broken thing becomes a revelation.

In my work with engaging organizations, the thing that has become most clear to me is that one can’t create engagement, one can only release it. The question we need to ask ourselves is not “What should we do?” but “What should we undo?” The call is to discover what binds us.

This call is more slippery than it sounds. I recently spent some time in Boston with an organization called The Food Project. The Food Project brings urban and suburban youth together to grow and distribute organic produce. The project operates a 30-acre farm half an hour outside of Boston and two unlikely urban gardens contentedly flourishing in Dorchester, one of Boston’s most distressed neighborhoods. One rainy Saturday morning, I went to visit the largest urban lot, where I found two dozen teenagers happily pulling weeds from the mud, giving the October tomatoes and cabbages new room to breathe. Mid-morning, I had a long conversation with a 16-year-old whom I will call Jamal.

I had heard about Jamal the day before from some of the project staff. They described him as a tough but charming natural leader who had grown up roaming the streets of Dorchester, if not in trouble then frequently at trouble’s edge. When he first joined The Food Project, he had a difficult time. He was used to navigating relationships with challenge and bravado, a rhythm that did not suit the respectful, gentle culture cultivated by the organization. He later said that where he came from, you had to “act like a lion” if you wanted to survive. The Food Project was apparently uninterested in lions. They kicked him out. After a few months he decided to reapply, putting himself under even more scrutiny. This time something took. When I met him he had moved through the summer program and was now one of a select group interning with the project during the school year.

He shook my hand with some hesitation but flashed a warm and peculiar smile that made me think the only thing he was shy about was revealing how confident he actually felt. Throughout the conversation he seemed at ease but slightly bemused, as if his own sureness surprised him. We talked about many things, but Jamal kept returning to the effect that his engagement with The Food Project had had on him. He described the organization as “an open circle” and used the word ‘safety’ frequently. (My experiences with organizations like these are leading me to believe that there is no safer structure in the world than “an open circle,” despite our anxieties to the contrary.) He said that if you come to the project with “the right mind,” you can discover “the positive you,” and he

contrasted the old aggressive, “nagging” version of himself, with the new kinder, more peaceful version. He said that the new version felt real.

One of Jamal’s issues the first time through the project was that he had little patience for rules or direction. He told me, “I don’t really like people dictating to me. I’m a leader, not a follower.” During the first weeks he frequently received “violations” for things like lateness and talking to people disrespectfully. He was unhappy. The organization was too strict. Someone was always “on his neck,” and he told himself, “This has to stop.” This was right before he was kicked out.

Frankly, I was sympathetic to the “old” Jamal. Despite the contented air of the place, one of the things that first struck me about The Food Project was the apparent rigidity of the rules and principles, not just for the teenagers, but for the staff, who in almost every conversation turned ‘accountability’ and ‘hard work’ into twin mantras. After my experience with Santropol Roulant, I was somewhat confused. The Food Project did have a vibrancy all its own. It felt alive and authentic, but not in the way that I was used to, and certainly not with the forms I was used to. Jamal continued: “Now the rules are nothing. I don’t think about them. We’re all equal. No one is watching me. We’re all out here getting dirty.” He studied the soil under his fingernails then resumed pulling weeds.

It is natural for us to think of stern organizational policies as constrictions: things that keep us from being authentic with ourselves and each other. Often they are. The work of unbinding our organization may typically involve relaxing or revoking various policies rules and procedures. Jamal, however, was bound by a much stricter code than The Food Project’s. Before coming there, he was subject to a very narrow set of behavioral rules involving distance, sarcasm, aggression. Perhaps one of his rules was, “Don’t be on time.” Perhaps being on time was a weakness, a capitulation. If so, Jamal’s inner “don’t be on time” rule was what was binding him. If poetry is the art of making the world strange so that we can see it anew, “be on time” was poetry for Jamal. Being on time allowed him to be more authentic, not less. It allowed him to be freer.

Don’t mistake this idea for cheap apologetics. It does not imply that all rules, or even most, are liberating. To an accountant who has been on time every day of his life for the last 30 years, “be on time” may well be what binds him. “Don’t be on time” is what will unbind him. Any form – any role, group, rule, procedure, etc. – can be binding. Any form can be poetry. And what is poetry one day might become cliché the next. The work of unbinding involves constant attentiveness toward what is in the way of fullness and oneness. To unbind an organization (or yourself) you must think like a poet.

Hannah Arendt (1998) distinguishes between ‘labor’, ‘work’, and ‘action’. Labor is the endless activity of maintaining ourselves biologically. Nothing permanent arises from labor. Work involves fabricating our physical and social spaces apart from nature. Work produces things of semi-permanence, but it is instrumental. It is not ultimately free because the work itself is subordinate to its ends. It is not a creative, expressive act in and of itself – only in terms of its output. Action is the ultimate form of creativity. It involves our capacity for newness – not for creating new things, but for being new ourselves.

The life span of man running toward death would inevitably carry everything human to ruin and destruction if it were not for the faculty of interrupting it and beginning something new, a faculty which is inherent in action like an ever-present reminder that men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin . . . Action, seen from the viewpoint of the automatic processes which seem to determine the course of the world, looks like a miracle. In the language of natural science, it is the “infinite improbability which occurs regularly.” (246)

To be unbound, organizations need to become places of action not of work. Arendt says that action can only occur when people are together. “Only action is entirely dependent upon the constant presence of others” (23). Action is the resolution of the fullness/oneness paradox. Action is the process through which we become entirely ourselves and yet unite finally and completely with each other.

If Arendt is right, action is not something we need to do, it is something we need merely to allow. It is natural to us. Wil, one of the staffers at The Food Project, told me that he saw the organization as “a safe place for people to become who they are.” This statement poses an interesting problem for the logician, but it sounds just right to me. I began this paper with my father-in-law, Jim. I will end it with him too. As a landscape architect, Jim has a favorite method for deciding where to put a path across any open lawn or field. He doesn’t look for the shortest route or for the most beautiful route or for the most ecologically sensitive route. In fact, he doesn’t choose the route at all. He simply waits. He watches people move through the landscape. He lets them walk where they want to walk. Over time, last week’s footsteps and this week’s footsteps begin to make sense of each other, scribing a deepening pattern in the grass. Then Jim takes out his tools and fashions a path in the perfect place. He puts it where it already is.

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