

MAKING TROUBLE (Chaos Theory)

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"There is no disputing that man likes creating rules. But why does he also like chaos and disorder, even into his old age?" --Dostoyevsky (Notes from the Underground)

I thought I knew something about the process of change. After all, hadn't I, at the age of 17, left a small Ontario farming community for the Atlantic coast? Hadn't I been married and divorced twice and watched three children grow up? Hadn't I changed *career paths* three times? Hadn't I been travelling the world for more than 30 years meeting and witnessing human activity on every continent and subcontinent? Hadn't I been on hand for the fall of the Berlin wall and the rise of democracy in South Africa? Notwithstanding these experiences, my recent decision to leave my Ottawa-based executive job and relocate to the west coast, has shaken me to my roots. Nothing in my life had prepared me to so fully enter the paradox raised by Dostoyevsky in his famous short novel.

I had been working in the international field for many years with the same institution and earned a national and international reputation. Those I worked for and with had been extremely generous with me, relied heavily on my judgment and permitted me to represent the institution in a variety of situations. The job permitted ample room for initiative and creativity at both the institutional and policy level and I had achieved an experience level where I was able to handle most things with relative ease.

So what gives? Why not leave well enough alone? Why, at the age of 48, did I deliberately create chaos and disorder in my life by leaving the security of a long-term job, selling or giving away my possessions and heading for the hills? Why did my decision have a ring of inevitability to it?

There are no easy answers. Indeed, some of what is happening often seems entirely outside the ability of my mind to grasp. Sometimes I think it is just insane. (In such moments I amuse myself with the old admonition that a sane person is just someone who's fiction is supported by the society).

At the *Beyond The New Horizons* program at PD Seminars, I had an opportunity to examine the application of chaos theory (or contextual science) to human development. Provided I don't take the ideas or myself too seriously, I realize these concepts offer some interesting possibilities in helping me understand my leap into "chaos and disorder." Certainly an immediate observation is that my decision has had something to do with my life-long affair with structures and with patterns of movement which have taken me either closer or farther away from "equilibrium,"(stillness), or "chaos,"(maximum turbulence).

Several years ago, when doing some personal process work, I experienced a kind of body-memory vignette from my early life, (probably age 2). In this vignette, I re-experienced sitting, terrified, on the beach in front of pounding waves. I thought I was all alone and that the waves could, at any moment, draw me into their turbulence. I reached back and grabbed something that felt solid and immediately felt comforted. The kinetic experience was a *felt sense* that I would be *ok* despite the waves, provided I held onto the structure. It seems quite plausible that an experience like this actually happened in my early childhood. Whether I was actually abandoned or whether my care-giver was just out of my sensory field seems irrelevant; as does whether or not the *something solid* was just a stroller leg. What is worth noting is that a deep learning seems to have taken place through this experience as I formed the idea that for me, *structure equals survival*.

In chaos theory much emphasis is placed on the *coupling* and *uncoupling* with context. The theory suggests that it is this process of coupling the molecular with the non-molecular which produces an outcome (while conventional science looks only at molecular structures or what can be seen). Rather than just the molecular structure of water, it is the "coupling" of water molecules to the non-molecular environment of wind and temperature in a particular way that produces a snowflake. In examining human development utilizing chaos theory it would be the coupling of the body with the non-molecular mind in a particular context that produces an outcome. In organizational development it could be the coupling of the non-molecular energy patterns of people to organizational structures.

The "context" of my early years most likely had to do with my experience of abandonment. Because of circumstances, I was placed in foster homes at the age of 6 months and did not settle into a stable home environment until I was nearly 5 years of age. It would make sense therefore that I would find a way to *couple* with this context. Certainly, much of my life has involved playing out this scenario in many forms. At the first sign of turbulence and disorder in my life, I have again and again reached for structure--for the *something solid*. And there are countless examples of where I have shifted again towards turbulence and away from the stasis of structure--be it in work life, family life or in some other form.

This observation suggests that it may very well be my basic rhythm to shift from turbulence to structure and back again. This shifting between structure and turbulence is also very similar to what psychologist Rollo May described as movement between the polarities of the *death fear* (the fear of being smothered by the collective) and the *life fear* (the fear of not being able to survive as an individual).

During the PD seminar on Gabriola, I was particularly struck by the observation in Dr. Dean Black's book *Inner Wisdom* that chaos theory can be applied to possibly help explain what happens when rhythms in our life are altered and what the implications may be for the health of both our bodies and our minds.

On that fateful day when I sat across from the man I had worked so closely with to tell him that I intended to leave my work, I had the sense that somehow I was saving my own life. I had no rational explanation for this sense, other than it was somehow connected with my health. While not life-threatening at this stage, my health had been problematic over the past year and during the meeting itself my stomach, (which later turned out to be massively infected), seemed on fire. I also had an unexplainable sense that half measures would not suffice and that if I didn't sever the relationship completely, even though I might want to re-connect at some other time in a different capacity, no genuine movement would take place. I also sensed that I needed to do this as a way of unlocking more of my creative energy.

In his book, Dr. Black suggests that rigidness occurs when we stop our natural energy flow or rhythms by *fixating*, moving closer to equilibrium (a kind of death), and away from chaos. The result could indeed be serious illness as energy implodes. This concept is very compatible with the ancient practice of acupuncture and other holistic treatments. In each case the idea is to facilitate energy flow to its natural rhythms and harmonies.

Despite the many attractive aspects of my work, I was associated with a structured institution that has a very definite structural context (i.e. philosophies, set relationship patterns, formalistic communications patterns etc). Notwithstanding the admirable goals

of the institution, I may have been permitting my fixations on the structure to pull me closer and closer towards a place of deadness in defiance of my basic rhythm. (I find it fascinating that people who have moved close to equilibrium in their work are often referred to as "dead-wood" or "dead-weight"). If this is true, my health issues could indeed have been an early warning sign of more trouble to come. So for me, the choice may have been to make trouble; rather than to get trouble.

In his book, Dr. Black proposes that states (such as boredom for example) that move us too close to equilibrium produce *rhythmic patterns* of their own that could cause illness. Certainly I can attest to the fact that my stomach and other health problems disappeared a few weeks after taking my decision to sever my employment relationship. Black also points out that *boredom* like *curiosity* are *states of mind*. (Boredom would take one closer to equilibrium while curiosity moves us closer to chaos).

These states of mind can be adjusted by *coupling* or *uncoupling* with our context. In other words, just as in the case of the waves and the stroller leg, I create both my turbulence and my shift back towards equilibrium through the process of coupling. This is compatible with another feature of chaos theory which has to do with fractals or patterns that repeat endlessly within patterns. Depending on the situation, either a "coupling" or "uncoupling" could change the whole pattern ad infinitum. This idea also suggests that unchanging patterns eventually become rigidities which will eventually provoke the process of change (although such change may be from health to illness as cells move towards chaos on their own, as seems to occur with cancer).

By *uncoupling* from my context of survival-dependence on a structure that had me on a steady slide towards equilibrium (a pattern that may have begun when I was two years of age), it seems like a long term rigidity has collapsed and there is an accompanying sense of freedom. I also soon began to experience a sense that I have somehow shifted closer to chaos (with all the symptoms of anxiety and disorientation that go with it).

To continue with the application of chaos theory to my process, the next step would seem to call for my *coupling* to my new context (which, paradoxically, will undoubtedly involve the creation of a new structure). To fail to do so would be to remain in what Black describes as an *uncoupled state of helplessness and fear*. In the shift from structured employment to a kind of non-strategic existence, my whole identity had come into question. For all of my life, I had defined myself by *what I did*. Now what? Who was it that was going to the west coast anyway?

About six weeks after my decision, I began to experience states of intense anxiety (that often came close to outright panic), as the consequences began to sink in. My mind would obsess with the idea that I would never again find any meaningful occupation and that there was a very good chance I wouldn't be able to look after my own basic survival needs.

In such a state one evening, I engaged in a dialogue with a close friend. As we talked about how *work* could actually be viewed as *schools for learning where you get paid*, a light went on. I suddenly became aware, at a deep level, of the wide range of possibilities that lay ahead for me. I was beginning to appreciate my new context. With a reduced anxiety level, I began to envision and feel myself entering a life that was more self-directed, authentic, autonomous and potentially more creative. Survival needs and anxieties were still in the foreground but I began to see them less as dependent upon a fixed employment context. This profound experience could be described as an initial

stage in the process of "coupling" with the new context created by my earlier "uncoupling."

In thinking about chaos theory utilizing my own process as a background, I realize there could be a great many implications for its application to organizations and (given the current debate about social programs in Canada) to public policy in areas of social support and employment. For example, is the tendency to fixate on structures and shift towards equilibrium in institutions universal? What are the implications of chaos theory on the altered rhythms that accompany retirement? Why do governments continue to support employment policies that facilitate people sliding to the deadness of equilibrium as if they were wind-up toys that run out of energy? What are the implications on health of this kind of employment system and what are the costs paid to maintain it? (For example, people who suffer from stress symptoms often exhibit a fixation on their employment structure). How could governments develop employment policies that support movements away from equilibrium or that at least facilitate the collapse of fixations? How could such policies be designed to protect against unscrupulous employers taking advantage of a more flexible workforce while ensuring that those making voluntary changes take responsibility for their own decisions? What would be the implications of such a process on social programs (especially pensions and unemployment insurance)? And finally, are we prepared to embrace an employment environment that is designed to facilitate making trouble before getting trouble? These ideas also ring some ancient bells. For example, they are very compatible with the admonitions from both western and eastern religious traditions that encourage us to "wear the world like a loose coat," or "be neither attached nor unattached."

So what about Dostoyevsky's question? In his book *The Courage to Create*, Rollo May suggests that it is in the tension between the *death fear* and the *life fear* that creativity emerges. Perhaps we can't leave "well enough alone" because we are constantly seeking to create. Maybe chaos theory is an invitation for us to *live in the paradoxes*. If these assumptions are valid, the issues become not *whether* we create, but *what* we create: illness or health; at the societal, institutional and personal level. Maybe we could consider creating living and working environments that foster tolerance for the temporary dysfunction and incredible energy that comes with making trouble for ourselves.