

A Thought Piece on Artful Knowing for a Sustainable Future

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The Sustainability Challenge: Organisational Change and Transformational Vision

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*It is difficult
to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there*

William Carlos Williams, Asphodel, That Greeny Flower

Artful Knowing for a Sustainable Future is concerned with how we come to know, how we cultivate our imaginative capacities and what we allow to inform our decision-making in pursuit of creating more sustainable systems, structures and organisations. The first part of this writing is a thought piece on why we might need artful knowing and in it I am unashamedly advocating that this is necessary if we are to realise the maintenance and restoration of the ecosystems upon which we depend. The second part of the paper moves on to lightly suggest a framework or way of thinking through which artful interventions and activities within organisations may be understood and discussed. The purpose of the framework is to stimulate thought and conversation about what might be possible and what is needed to question and break through the limitations of our current dominant paradigm. Artful knowing is more about a way of being, a stance to take, rather than a solution or a method. There are no easy answers...

The issue we collectively face is one of imagination as much as one of ingenuity, of living into radically different ways of organising ourselves as much as solving problems. How might our lives and organisations evolve in ways that are neither reduced to doom and gloom hair-shirt narratives of less, nor reliant on the unrealistic mantra of business-as-usual-because-technology-will-save-us?

Our challenge is less about finding some kind of grey middle path between these two scenarios as daring to strike out in another direction which demands the rigour and creativity of coming to sense, know and respond to our global life support systems in artful ways. This is not to reject our species' intellectual prowess and its importance as part of our attempt to meet our needs in sustainable, restorative ways, but it is to claim that the human intellect alone will not "save us from ourselves". Fuller ways of knowing are needed for us to recognise and respond to the living whole and offer us insight into how we are to be and act in the face of ecosystemic destruction.

Organisational and strategic development disciplines, practices and approaches such as Action Inquiry (Reason and Bradbury, 2001) and the lesser known Goethean Science (Kaplan, 2002) demand of us that we value and develop the many ways we come to know beyond grazing the intellectual or delving into abstracted. They ask that we “extend” our epistemology (ways to know) by paying rigorous aesthetic and embodied attention to the ways we receive and respond to the world through our experience, movement, stories, image making, musicality, practice, play and performance... as well as through our ideas and theories (Heron 1992). This expansion means developing everyday aesthetic practices for ourselves and others: *“aesthetic experience emerges due to a certain mode of activity... in the aesthetic experience, we have conscious access to knowledge through our body as a whole... and the sense of the system of interactions as a whole”* (Arteaga, personal communication).

Making the link between cultivating these fuller ways to knowing and creating a more sustainable future, these ways of working seek to heal the Cartesian mind/body split through an “epistemotherapy” (Rosen, 1994) and a greater “epistemological equity” (Cole, 2004).

Cultivating greater equity between our different ways to knowing is not “just” a personal development task, but one requiring a systematic awareness of what gets noticed and valued – what gets onto the agenda and what gets taken seriously, by whom. This does not mean devaluing intellectual endeavour, but bringing alongside it the individual and collective practices of paying attention to the imagination, to intuitive knowing, emotional data, aesthetic and embodied knowing.

Commenting on the work of Gregory Bateson, Noel Charlton says:

“If aesthetic engagement offers us a remedy for our sealed-off, self-seeking purposiveness, it will do so by reconnecting, integrating, enabling wholeness and the recognition of oneness. Further, we must be involved in active process with the art and with the natural beauty...”
(Charlton, 2008: p141)

“Engagement in aesthetic process, as creative artist or ‘appreciator’ of art (and ‘art’ means poetry, music, drama, dance and ‘natural history’ as well as painting and sculpture) enables us to recover our lost sense of unity with the living world, our integration with the rest of life on the planet.” (Charlton, 2004, pages unnumbered).

Notice though how easy it is to fall into the trap of theorising *about* knowing holistically without actually living more wholly on an everyday basis as practitioners, managers, consultants and educators (you could say we are doing it right here and now). Scientist Steven Rosen came to recognise the limitations of conventional academic writing in the epilogue of his book “Science, Paradox, and the Moebius Principle”, saying:

“To put the problem succinctly, if I am seeking wholeness in the fullest meaning of the word, it is not enough for me merely to write about it; wholeness must be embodied in my own way of writing. The basic impediment here is that writing is an activity whose

*conventional form serves to **obscure** wholeness... [Whereas] poetry allows the subject to reverberate amidst the objectification” (Rosen, 1994: pp. 269-70, emphases in original text).*

Abstractions and intellectualisations still have the upper hand in organisational life (including this paper), with more artful, imaginal and poetic ways of knowing¹ remaining latent, relegated to a box marked perhaps as “entertaining ice breakers”, “private and personal” at best and “not suitable for a conference”, “pink and fluffy” or “irrelevant and un-measurable” at worst.

Our living bodies, senses, emotional responses, imaginations and intuitions are routinely dismissed as reliable sources of information and the practices which could cultivate these ways of knowing with rigour are largely neglected and underdeveloped.

If we, our organisations and the other-than-human (upon which we depend) world are to flourish then we must carry the responsibility to become more wholly human, not merely acknowledging that we come to know in diverse ways but to actually *live* and *be* in ways which invite the artful *and* the intellectual, the embodied *and* the theoretical, the hearty *and* the heady with equal thoroughness, seriousness and enthusiasm. We need to dissolve the boundaries that split these artificial categories and develop a comprehensivist², transdisciplinary rigour if we are to enhance the qualities of life around and within us and achieve a broader sense of “success”.

“One of the things we are desperate for now, in the post-modern world is the first hand experience of creation. We are tired of talking about the world and we’re tired of observing the world through various media and we want to be actually present to it and affected by it in a very innocent way.”

(David Whyte, 2008)

Yet, in an industrial society which tends to place us in the role of passive consumer and devalue artful practice as being somehow frivolous whilst simultaneously reifying it through the “Art World” of galleries, concert halls and auctions, it is hard to carve out space for ordinary everyday knowing to be made through attending to our moving, drawing, stories or poetry – both in our own lives and through the strictures of organisational norms. Somehow we deny ourselves the most delightful, useful and nourishing fruits of the self-reflective and imaginal consciousness which we humans uniquely offer – and need.

How, then, do we make the deeper shift from intellectually recognising broader, more whole ways to know³ toward cultivating and living our lives⁴ in ways which incorporate our extraordinary birthright and evolutionary gift of receiving and responding to the world art/fully rather than destructively?

¹ Artful Organisation is a movement being developed in conjunction with Ashridge Business School, see: www.artfulorganisation.org

² This term was coined by Buckminster Fuller

³ Ways of knowing> epistemology

⁴ Nature of being> ontology

Artful Organisation

In organisational terms, the thought-piece above might be summarised as a question:

**How can organisations cultivate artful and creative ways
to help reimagine their role, their relationships and themselves
for a sustainable future?**

There is a significant difference between using, or appropriating the arts in service of some predetermined organizational or economic goal (for example, branding campaigns) and cultivating artful approaches as a source of new knowledge, where the outcome is unpredictable because it is the product of improvised, embodied, more-than-intellectual interaction.

If artful knowing is encouraged in organisations only to achieve “within frame” instrumental goals (like shareholder gain), the organisation might benefit, but with little deeper change. If, on the other hand, a model of coming to know through interactive, improvised and reflective artful approaches were adopted, organisations might be deeply challenged because such a model would empower people to think and act differently. New voices and suppressed longings would be unearthed and heard, new perspectives would influence decisions and radically new ways of doing business might come into being⁵.

Such activity may serve to reconnect us with the planetary systems upon which we depend and prime us to make decisions in the common interest, beyond the narrow confines of financial profit and business as usual. Indeed, participation in the arts per se may activate a broader common interest frame:

*“If aesthetic **engagement** offers us a remedy for our sealed-off, self-seeking purposiveness, it will do so by **reconnecting, integrating, enabling wholeness and the recognition of oneness**. Further, we must be involved in **active process with the art and with the natural beauty... Engagement in aesthetic process, as creative artist or ‘appreciator’ of art (and ‘art’ means poetry, music, drama, dance and ‘natural history’ as well as painting and sculpture) enables us to recover our lost sense of unity with the living world, our integration with the rest of life on the planet.***” (Charlton, 2008: p141... Charlton, 2004).

It is challenge enough to do and be this on an individual basis, but to do so collectively, organizationally, is a big leap. The following framework expresses this framing as a way of understanding the interplay of practices, responsibilities, possibilities and motivations of artful organisation.

One axis of the framework looks at the continuum between artful ways to generate new knowledge and communicate existing knowledge. The other axis looks at the extent to which taken for granted norms and assumptions can be questioned and challenged.

⁵ I am indebted to WWF’s “Common Cause” for this insightful framing, see: http://www.wwf.org.uk/wwf_articles.cfm?unewsid=4224.

	Generating new knowledge <i>Artful knowing as a viable method for imagining future organisational evolution</i>	Communicating existing ideas <i>Artful knowing as a way of communicating and influencing experience and behaviour</i>
<p>Overtly frame questioning</p> <p><i>Cultivating “bigger-than-self” responses to current organisational, social and ecological challenges in the common interest. Long term view.</i></p>	<p>Expanding our capacity to know in different ways</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invites critical questioning of “normal” frames and underlying assumptions; • Is transparent and overt in its approach; • Enables and explicitly invites new realities to be imagined that may be more appropriate organisational responses to our times; • Redresses the imbalance and dominance of intellectual knowing in organisations; • Invites relational knowing and reconnection with the more-than-human and more-than-intellectual worlds in the common interest; • May provide new knowing of direct relevance, or “prime” people to receive and respond to contexts differently; • May start to reconfigure the organization itself. • Example: Interplay working with teams to develop deeper connections to each other, themselves and world as part of strategy-making processes. 	<p>Shaping society for a sustainable future</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliberately seeks to reframe dominant norms towards more sustainable organisations. • Is transparent and overt in its approach; • Taps into, names and reinforces values that are in the common interest; • May convey ideas of direct relevance, or prime people to receive and respond to contexts differently; • May, or may not be in the direct interest of the organization itself. • Example: Dove Soap campaign valuing non-idealised “real” women.
<p>Within frame, does not question underlying assumptions and norms</p> <p><i>Pursuing taken-for-granted outcomes for self-interested organisational gain. Short term view.</i></p>	<p>Appropriating the arts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be covert both in its aims and power agenda; • Can be exploitative or even coercive of employees; • Is likely to “filter out” responses that question, undermine or critique its predetermined outcome; • Expects to be of direct relevance; • Redresses the imbalance and dominance of intellectual knowing in organizations. • May activate a broader common interest frame; • Example: Large Fossil Fuel Supplier using dance, singing, mark making to get their teams to be more productive. 	<p>Consumer Branding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Covertly shapes society; • Can be exploitative of customers; • Can reinforce destructive and addictive societal norms; • Can inadvertently reinforce unhelpful framings (<i>for example, “green consumerism” still reinforces the underlying and unhelpful societal value of consumerism</i>); • Seeks to condition people to respond in particular ways; • Does not necessarily meet vital human needs; • Example: Fragrances claiming to meet the basic human need for affection

Developing ways of encountering the world through artful knowing is not just a matter of switching *epistemological styles* (Kegan, 1994: 201), nor of representing intellectual, abstracted knowing in “prettied-up” ways. Allowing the form and complexity of artful knowing to evolve is a matter of expanding *epistemological capacity*, of “*a journey of increasing epistemological vision*” (Kegan, 1994: 201). The above framework makes an explicit link between such a deeper vision and a sense of intention above and beyond the imperative to generate shareholder return. It expands the territory of organisational responsibility to include questioning, exploring and making transparent deeper issues of purpose.

We need to revise and expand our awareness and receive and respond to the world differently - in ways that aren't necessarily reducible to intellectual knowing (remember Isadora Duncan's quotation: “*If I could tell you what it meant, there would be no point in dancing it*”). Unknowns sometimes need to be left as unknowns, and to reveal themselves in their own time, through *acquaintance* rather than grabbing at an *unearned familiarity* (Kegan, 1994: 207). We don't know all the answers and just thinking harder isn't going to give them to us.

Down underneath our epistemological impoverishment, I am coming to think that at the deepest level we know all this anyway. We know this in all the ways we have to know. Beneath the chatter and the noise, the statistics and the facts, the messages and the tweets and the updates and the breaking news, we know in deeper, fuller ways. We know, deep down, that fundamentally something isn't right about the ways we conventionally organise ourselves. Like creatures in a forest, sometimes this knowledge can only be glimpsed through the trees or with a sideways glance. Often it goes unacknowledged altogether. Our point of contact with this creaturely knowing comes through an invitation we must freely issue over and over again. Our responsibility is to make space for this embodied, vital conversation and gift it our attention in all the ways we can.

“I know artists whose medium is Life itself, and who express the inexpressible without brush, pencil, chisel or guitar. They neither paint nor dance. Their medium is Being. Whatever their hand touches has increased Life. They SEE and don't have to draw. They are the artists of being alive.” (Franck, 1973: 129)

Coda

After presenting this material, along with some group hand dance work from Interplay (www.interplay.org), I compiled this additional list of “rational” reasons why expanding our ways of knowing is essential to shape a future where we and the ecosystems of which we are a part can flourish with quality, diversity and – as deep ecologist Arne Naess says – self realisation:

- **Cultivating imagination on an everyday basis;**
- **Seeing the patterns that connect;**
- **Systemic thinking and acting;**
- **Relational practice;**
- **Re/establishing emotional attachment with the world around us;**
- **Re/membering ourselves as just “plain members of the biotic community”: (Aldo Leopold);**
- **Cultivating ourselves as body-intellectuals as well as mind-intellectuals (realising our creaturely bodies as reliable sources of information);**
- **Recognising and knowing the non-human.**

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