Bringing Life to Organizational Change

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After so many years of defending ourselves against life and searching for better controls, we sit exhausted in the unyielding structures of organization we've created, wondering what happened. What happened to effectiveness, to creativity, to meaning? What happened to us? Trying to get these structures to change becomes the challenge of our lives. We draw their futures and design them into clearly better forms. We push them, we prod them. We try fear, we try enticement,. We collect tools, we study techniques. We use everything we know and end up nowhere. What happened?

From *A Simpler Way*, Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers

We know that it is possible to facilitate successful organizational change. We have witnessed organizations that have changed not only in terms of a new destinationÑnew processes, structures, performance levelsÑbut that simultaneously have increased their capacity to deal with change generally. In these systems, after the change effort, people felt more committed to the organization, more confident of their own contributions, and more prepared to deal with change as a continuous experience.

But we'd like to start by acknowledging the more typical, and depressing, history that's accumulated around several decades of organizational change efforts. We hope that by acknowledging this dismal track record you will feel free to contemplate very different approaches.

In recent surveys, CEOS report that up to 75% of their organizational change efforts do not yield the promised results. These change efforts fail to produce what had been hoped for, yet always produce a stream of unintended and unhelpful consequences. Leaders end up managing the impact of unwanted effects rather than the planned results that didn't materialize. Instead of enjoying the fruits of a redesigned production unit, the leader must manage the hostility and broken relationships created by the redesign. Instead of glorying in the new efficiencies produced by restructuring, the leader must face a burned out and demoralized group of survivors. Instead of basking in a soaring stock price after a merger, leaders must scramble frantically to get people to work together peaceably, let alone effectively.

In the search to understand so much failure, a lot of blame gets assigned. One healthcare executive recently commented that: "We're under so much stress that all we do is look around the organization to find somebody we can shoot." (And the executive quoted is a nun!) It's become commonplace to say that people resist change, that the organization lacks the right people to move it into the future, that people no longer assume responsibility for their work, that people are too dependent, that all they do is whine.

We'd like to put a stop to all this slander and the ill will it's creating in our organizations. We strongly believe that failures at organizational change are the result of some very deep misunderstandings of who people are and what's going on inside organizations. If we can clear up these misunderstandings, effectiveness and hope can return to our experience. Successful organizational change is possible if we look at our organizational experience with new eyes.

There's something ironic about our struggles to effect change in organizations. We participate in a world where change is all there is. We sit in the midst of continuous creation, in a universe whose creativity and adaptability are beyond comprehension. Nothing is ever the same twice, really. And in our personal lives, we adapt and change all the time, and we witness this adaptability in our children, friends, colleagues. There may be more than 100 million species on earth, each of whom displays the ability to change. Yet we humans fail at our change projects and accuse one another of being incapable of dealing with change. Are we the only species that digs in its heels and resists? Or perhaps all those other creatures simply went to better training programs on "Coping with Change and Transition."

For several years, through our own work in an enormously varied range of organizations, we've learned that life is the best teacher about change. If we understand how life organizes, how the world supports its unending diversity and flexibility, we can then know how to create organizations where creativity, change, and diversity are abundant and supportive. If we shift our thinking about organizing, we can access the same change capacities that we see everywhere around us in all living beings. But learning from life's processes requires a huge shift.

It's become common these days to describe organizations as "organic." Assumedly this means we no longer think of them as machines, which was the dominant view of organizations, people, and the universe for the past three hundred years. But do current practices in organizations resemble those used by life? Do recent organizational change processes feel more alive? From what we've observed, "organic" is a new buzz word describing organizational processes that haven't changed. These processes remain fundamentally mechanistic. No where is this more apparent than in how we approach organizational change.

A few years ago, we asked a group of Motorola engineers and technicians to describe how they went about changing a machine. In neat sequential steps, here's what they described:

1. Assign a manager

2. Set a goal that is bigger and better

3. Define the direct outcomes

4. Determine the measures

5. Dissect the problem

6. Redesign the machine

7. Implement the adaptation

8. Test the results

9. Assign blame

Sound familiar? Doesn't this describe most of the organizational change projects you've been involved in? We see only one real difference, which is that in organizations we skip step 8. We seldom test the results of our change efforts. We catch a glimmer of the results that are emerging (the unintended consequences,) and quickly realize that they're not what we had planned for or what we sold to senior leadership. Instead of delving into what the results areÑinstead of *learning* from this experienceÑwe do everything we can to get attention off the entire project. We spin off into a new project, announce yet another initiative, reassign managers and teams. Avoiding being the target of blame becomes the central activity rather than learning from what just happened. No wonder we keep failing!

Life changes its forms of organization using an entirely different process. Since human organizations are filled with living beings (we hope you agree with that statement,) we believe that life's change process is also an accurate description of how change is occurring in organizations right now. This process can't be described in neat increments. It occurs in the tangled webs of relationships--the networks--that characterize all living systems. There are no simple stages or easy-to-draw causal loops. Most communication and change occur quickly but invisibly, concealed by the density of interrelationships. If organizations behave like living systems, this description of how a living system changes should feel familiar to you.

Some part of the system (the system can be anything--an organization, a community, a business unit) notices something. It might be in a memo, a chance comment, a news report. It chooses to be disturbed by this. "Chooses" is the operative word here--the freedom to be disturbed belongs to the system. No one ever tells a living system what should disturb it (even though we try all the time.) If it chooses to be disturbed, it takes in the information and circulates it rapidly through its networks. As the disturbance circulates, others take it and amplify it. The information grows, changes, becomes distorted from the original, but all the time it is accumulating more and more meaning. The information may swell to such importance that the system can't deal with it in its present state. Then and only then will the system begin to change. It is forced, by the sheer meaningfulness of the information, to let go of its present beliefs, structures, patterns, values. It cannot use its past to make sense of this new information. The system must truly let go, plunging itself into a state of confusion and uncertainty that feels like chaos, a state that always feels terrible. But having fallen apart, having let go of who it has been, the system now is capable of reorganizing itself to a new mode of being. It is, finally, open to change. It begins to reorganize around new interpretations, new meaning. It re-creates itself around new understandings of what's real and what's important. It becomes different because it understands the world differently. It becomes new because it was forced to let go of the old. And like all living systems, paradoxically it has changed because it was the only way it saw to preserve itself.

If you contemplate the great difference between these two descriptions of how change occurs in a machine and in a living system, you understand what a big task awaits us. We need to better understand the processes by which a living system transforms itself, and from that understanding, rethink every change effort we undertake. We'd like to describe in more detail these processes used by life and their implications for organizational change practices.

Every living being--every microbe, every person--develops and changes because it has the freedom to create and preserve itself. The freedom to create one's self is the foundational freedom of all life. One current definition of "life" in biology is that something is alive if it is capable of producing itself. The word is auto-poiesis, from the same root as poetry. Every living being is author of its own existence, and continues to create itself through its entire life span. In the past, we've thought of freedom as a political idea, or contemplated free will as a spiritual concept. But now it appears in biology as an inalienable condition of life. Life gives to itself the freedom to become, and without that freedom to create there is no life.

In our lives together and in our organizations we must account for the fact that everyone there requires, as a condition of their being, the freedom to author their own life. Every person, overtly or covertly, struggles to preserve this freedom to self-create. If you find yourself disagreeing with this statement, think about your experiences with managing others, be they workers, children or anyone. Have you ever had the experience of giving another human being a set of detailed instructions and succeeded in having them follow them exactly, to the letter? We haven't met anyone who's had this sought after experience of complete, robot-like obedience to their directives, so we're assuming that your experience is closer to the following. You give someone clear instructions, written or verbal, and they always change it in some way, even just a little. They tweak it, reinterpret it, ignore parts of it, add their own coloration or emphasis. When we see these behaviors, if we're the manager, we feel frustrated or outraged. Why can't they follow directions? Why are they so resistant? Why are they sabotaging my good work?

But there's another interpretation possible, actually inevitable, if we look at this through the interpretive lens of living systems. We're not observing resistance or sabotage or stupidity. We're observing the fact that people need to be creatively involved in how their work gets done. We're seeing people exercising their inalienable freedom to create for themselves. They take *our* work and recreate it as *their* work. And none of us can stop anyone from this process of re-creationÑof tweaking, ignoring, changing the directionsÑwithout deadening that person. The price we pay for perfect obedience is that we forfeit vitality, literally that which gives us life. We submit to another's direction only by playing dead. We end up dispirited, disaffected and lifeless. And then our superiors wonder why we turned out so badly.

You may think this is an outrageously optimistic view of what's going on in organizations, because undoubtedly you can name those around you who display no creative desires and who only want to be told what to do. But look more closely at their behavior. Is it as robot-like as it first appears? Are they truly passive, or passive aggressive (just another term for how some people assert their creativity.) And what are their lives like outside of work? How complex is the private life they deal with daily?

Or look at human history. Over and over it testifies to the indomitable human spirit rising up against all forms of oppression. No matter how terrible the oppression, humans find ways to assert themselves. No system of laws or rules can hold us in constraint; no set of directions

can tell us exactly how to proceed. We will always bring ourselves into the picture, we will always add our unique signature to the situation. Whether leaders call us innovative or rebellious depends on their comprehension of what's going on.

The inalienable freedom to create one's life shows up in other organizationally familiar scenes. People, like the rest of life, maintain the freedom to decide what to notice. We choose what disturbs us. It's not the volume or even the frequency of the message that gets our attention. If it's meaningful to us, we notice it. All of us have prepared a presentation, a report, a memo about a particular issue because we knew that this issue was critical. Failing to address this would have severe consequences for our group or organization. But when we presented the issue, we were greeted not with enthusiasm and gratitude, but with politeness or disinterest. The issue went nowhere. Others dropped it and moved on to what they thought was important. Most often when we have this experience, we interpret their disinterest as our failure to communicate, so we go back and rewrite the report, develop better graphics, create a jazzier presentation style. But none of this matters. Our colleagues are failing to respond because they don't share our sense that this is meaningful. This is a failure to find shared significance, not a failure to communicate. They have exercised their freedom and chosen not to be disturbed.

If we understand that this essential freedom to create one's self is operating in organizations, not only can we reinterpret behaviors in a more positive light, but we can begin to contemplate how to work with this great force rather than deal with the consequences of ignoring its existence. We'd like to highlight four critically important principles for practice.

First, when thinking about strategies for organizational change, we need to remember: **Participation is not a choice**. We have no choice but to invite people into the process of rethinking, redesigning, restructuring the organization. We ignore people's need to participate at our own peril. If they're involved, they will create a future that already has them in it. We won't have to engage in the impossible and exhausting tasks of "selling" them the solution, getting them "to enroll," or figuring out the incentives that might bribe them into compliant behaviors. For the past fifty years a great bit of wisdom has circulated in the field of organizational behavior: People support what they create. In observing how life organizes, we would restate this maxim as: People *only* support what they create. Life insists on its freedom to participate and can never be sold on or bossed into accepting someone else's plans.

After many years of struggling with participative processes, you may hear "participation is not a choice" as a death sentence to be avoided at all costs. But we'd encourage you to think about where your time has gone in change projects generally. If they were not broadly participativeÑand our definition of "broad" means figuring out how to engage the whole system over timeÑhow much of your time was spent on managing the unintended effects created by people feeling left out or ignored? How many of your efforts were directed at selling a solution that you knew no one really wanted? How much of your energy went into redesigning the redesign after the organization showed you its glaring omissions, omissions caused by their lack of involvement in the first redesign?

In our experience, enormous struggles with implementation are created every time we *deliver* changes to the organization rather than figuring out how to involve people in their creation. These struggles are far more draining and prone to failure than what we wrestle with in trying

to engage an entire organization. Time and again we've seen implementation move with dramatic speed among people who have been engaged in the design of those changes.

But we all know this, don't we? We know that while people are engaged in figuring out the future, while they are engaged in the difficult and messy processes of participation, that they are simultaneously creating the conditionsÑnew relationships, new insights, greater levels of commitment—that facilitate more rapid and complete implementation. But because participative processes seem to take longer and sometimes overwhelm us with the complexity of human interactions, many leaders grasp instead for quickly derived solutions from small groups that are then delivered to the whole organization. They keep hoping this will work—it would make life so much easier. But life won't let it work, people will always resist these impositions. Life, all of life, insists on participation. We can work with this insistence and use it to engage people's creativity and commitment, or we can keep ignoring it and spend most of our time dealing with all the negative consequences.

A second principle also derives from life's need for participation: **Life always reacts to directives, it never obeys them.** It never matters how clear or visionary or important the message is. It can only elicit reactions, not straightforward compliance. If we recognize that this principle is at work all the time in all organizations, it changes the expectations of what can be accomplished anytime we communicate. We can expect reactions that will be as varied as the individuals who hear it. Therefore, anything we say or write is only an invitation to others to become involved with us, to think with us. If we offer our work as an invitation to react, this changes our relationships with associates, subordinates, and superiors. It opens us to the partnering relationships that life craves. Life accepts only partners, not bosses.

This principle especially affects leader behaviors. Instead of searching for the disloyal ones, or repeating and repeating the directions, she or he realizes that there is a great deal to be learned from the reactions. Each reaction reflects a different perception of what's important, and if that diversity is explored, the organization develops a richer, wiser understanding of what's going on. The capacity for learning and growth expands as concerns about loyalty or compliance recede.

As leaders begin to explore the diversity resident in even a small group of people, life asks something else of them. No two reactions will be identical; no two people or events will look the same. Leaders have to forego any desire they may have held for complete repetition or sameness, whether it be of persons or processes. Even in industries that are heavily regulated or focused on finely detailed procedures (such as nuclear power plants, hospitals, many manufacturing plants,) if people only repeat the procedures mindlessly, those procedures eventually fail. Mistakes and tragedies in these environments bear witness to the effects of lifeless behaviors. But these lifeless behaviors are a predictable response to processes that demand repetition rather than personal involvement in the process. This is by no means a suggestion that we abandon procedures or standardization. But it is crucial to notice that there is no such thing as a human-proof procedure. We have to honor the fact that people always need to include themselves in how a procedure gets done. They may accomplish this by understanding the reasoning behind the procedure, or by knowing that they are sanctioned to adjust it if circumstances change. We all need to see that there is room enough for our input, for us, in how our work gets done.

And again, life doesn't give us much choice here. Even if we insist on obedience, we will never gain it for long, and we only gain it at the cost of what we wanted most, loyalty, intelligence and responsiveness.

A third principle derived from life is: **We do not see "reality." We each create our own interpretation of what's real.** We see the world through who we are, or, as expressed by the poet Michael Chitwood: "What you notice becomes your life." Since no two people are alike, no two people have exactly the same interpretation of what's going on. Yet at work and at home we act as if others see what we see and assign the same meaning as we do to events. We sit in a meeting and watch something happen and just assume that most people in that room, or at least those we trust, saw the same thing. We might even engage them in some quick conversation that seems to confirm our sense of unanimity:

"Did you see what went on in there!?"
"I know, I couldn't believe what I was seeing."
"Really!"

But if we stopped to compare further, we'd soon discover significant and useful differences in what we saw and how we interpreted the situation.

As we work with this principle, we begin to realize that arguing about who's right and who's wrong is a waste of time. If we engage with colleagues to share perceptions, if we expect and even seek out the great diversity of interpretations that exist, we learn and change. The biologist Francisco Varela redefined organizational intelligence. He said it wasn't the ability to solve problems that made an organization smart. It was the ability of its members to enter into a world whose significance they shared. If everyone in the group thinks that what is occurring is significant (even as they have different perspectives,) then they don't have to convince one another. They can actÑrapidly, creatively, and in concert.

Entering into a world of shared significance is only achieved, as far as we've seen, by engaging in conversations with colleagues. Not debates or oratories, but conversation that welcomes in the unique perspective of everyone there. If we remain *curious* about what someone else sees, and refrain from convincing them of our interpretation, we develop a richer view of what might be going on. And we also create collegial relations that enable us to work together with greater speed and effectiveness. When any of us feel invited in to share our perspective, we repay that respect and trust with commitment and friendship.

And a very important paradox becomes evident. We don't have to agree on an interpretation or hold identical values in order to agree on what needs to be done. We don't have to settle for the lowest common denominator, or waste hours and hours politicking for our own, decided-on-ahead-of-time solution. As we sit together and listen to so many differing perspectives, we get off our soapboxes and open to new ways of thinking. We have allowed these new perspectives to disturb us and we've changed. And surprisingly, this enables us to agree on a concerted course of action, and to support it wholeheartedly. This paradox flies in the face of how we've tried to reach group consensus, but it makes good sense from a living system's perspective. We all need to participate, and when we're offered that opportunity, we then want to work with others. We've entered into a world whose significance is shared by all of us, and because of that process we've developed a lot of energy for deciding *together* what to do next.

The fourth principle from life is the best prescription we've found for thinking about organizational change efforts. **To create better health in a living system, connect it to more of itself.** When a system is failing, or performing poorly, the solution will be discovered *within the system* if more and better connections are created. A failing system needs to start talking to itself, especially to those it didn't know were even part of itself. The value of this practice was quite evident at the beginning of the customer service revolution, when talking to customers and dealing with the information they offered became a potent method for stimulating the organization to new levels of quality. Without customer inclusion and their feedback, workers couldn't know what or how to change. Quality standards rose dramatically once customers were connected to the system.

This principle embodies a profound respect for systems. It says that they are capable of changing themselves, once they are provided with new and richer information. It says that they have a natural tendency to move toward better functioning or health. It assumes that the system already has within it most of the expertise that it needs. This principle also implies that the critical task for a leader is to increase the number, variety and strength of connections within the system. Bringing in more remote or ignored members, providing access across the system, and through those connections stimulating the creation of new informationÑall of these become primary tasks for fostering organizational change.

These four principles provide very clear indicators of how, within our organizations, we can work with life's natural tendency to learn and change. As we all were taught by an advertisement many years ago, we can't fool Mother Nature. If we insist on developing organizational change processes suited for machines and ignore life's imperative to participate in the creation of itself, then we can only anticipate more frequent and costly failures.

We have been careful to state principles here rather than techniques or step-by-step methods. This is in keeping with our understanding of how life organizes. The organizations that life creates are highly complex. They are filled with structures, behavioral norms, communication pathways, standards and accountabilities. But all this complexity is obtained by an organizing process that is quite simple, and that honors the individual's need to create. The complexity of a living system is the result of individuals freely deciding how best to interpret a few simple principles or patterns that are the heart of that system. These simple patterns of behavior are not negotiable and cannot be ignored. But how they get interpreted depends on the immediate circumstance and the individuals who find themselves in that circumstance. Everyone is accountable to the patterns, but everyone is free to engage their own creativity to figure out what those patterns mean. This process of organizing honors individual freedom, engages creativity and individuality, yet simultaneously achieves an orderly and coherent organization.

From such simple patterns complex organizations arise. Structures, norms, networks of communication develop from the constant interactions among system members as they interpret the patterns in changing circumstances. Individuals make decisions about how best to embody the patterns, and an organization arises. Sophisticated organizational forms appear, but always these forms materialize *from the inside out*. They are never imposed from the outside in.

In human organizations, we have spent so many years determining the details of the organizationÑits structures, values, communication channels, vision, standards, measures. We let experts or leaders design them, and then strategize how to get them accepted by the

organization. Living systems have all these features and details, but they originate differently, from within the system. As we think of organizations as living systems, we don't need to discard our concern for such things as standards, measures, values, organizational structures, plans. We don't need to give up any of these. But we do need to change our beliefs and behaviors about where these things come from. In a living system, they are generated from within, in the course of figuring out what will work well in the current situation. In a machine where there is no intelligence or creative energy, these features are designed outside and then programmed or engineered in. We can easily discern whether we are approaching our organization as a living system or as a machine by asking: Who gets to create any aspect of the organization? We know we need structure, plans, measures, but who gets to create them? The source of authorship makes all the difference. People only support what they create.

Last year we met a junior high school principal who gave us a superb example of creating a complex and orderly system from a few simple patterns. He is responsible for eight hundred adolescents, ages twelve to fourteen. Most school administrators fear this age group and the usual junior high school is filled with rules and procedures in an attempt to police the hormone-crazed tendencies of early teens. But his junior high school operated from three rules, and three rules only. EveryoneÑstudents, teachers, staffÑknew the rules and used them to deal with all situations. The three rules are disarmingly simple: 1. Take care of yourself; 2. Take care of each other; 3. Take care of this place. (As we've thought about these rules, we've come to believe that they might be all we need to create a better world, not just a junior high school.)

Few of us would believe that you could create an orderly group of teen-agers, let alone a good learning environment, from such simple rules. But the principal told a story of just how effective these three rules were in creating a well-functioning school. A fire broke out in a closet and all 800 students had to be evacuated. They stood outside in pouring rain until it was safe to return to the building. The principal was the last in, and he reported being greeted by 800 pairs of wet shoes lined up in the lobby.

Principles define what we have decided is significant to us as a community or organization. They contain our agreements about what we will notice, what we will choose to let disturb us. In the case of these students, wet shoes and muddy floors were something they quickly noticed, something that disturbed them because they had already agreed to "take care of this place." They then acted freely to create a response that made sense to them in this unique circumstance.

In deciding on what to emphasize in this article, we knew that you required even more freedom than these students to design organizational change processes that would work best in your unique situation. Therefore we chose to give you principles to work with, principles that we have found work with life's great capacity for change. As with all principles, once they are agreed upon, they need to be taken very seriously. They are the standards to which we agree to hold ourselves accountable. But clear principles provide only standards for our efforts, they never describe the details of how to do something. They do not restrict our creativity, they simply guide our designs and create coherence among our many diverse efforts. Their clarity serves as an invitation to be creative. Think about how many *different* approaches and techniques you could create that would be congruent with the four principles we stated. How many different forms of practice could materialize as people in your organization invented change processes that honored these principles?

No two change processes need look the same. In fact this is an impossibility--no technique ever materializes in the same way twice. Nothing transfers unchanged. (If it did, you wouldn't be struggling with the issue of organizational change. You would have found what worked somewhere else and successfully imported it.) But if we hold ourselves accountable to these principles, we can create our own unique change processes confident that we are working *with* life rather than denying it. We will have been guided by these principles to create processes that take advantage of the creativity and desire to contribute that reside in the vast majority of the people in our organizations.

We'd like to invite you to experiment with this approach and these four principles. As with all good experiments, this means not only that you try something new, but that you watch what happens and learn from the results. Good experimentation is a process of constant tinkering, making little adjustments as the results come in, trying to discover what's responsible for the effects that show up. So for whatever you start in motion, we ask that you watch it carefully, involve many eyes in the observing, and tinker as you go.

One experiment you might try is to give these four principles to a project design team, either one that's just starting, or one that's trying to rescue a change process that's not working well. See what they can create as they hold themselves accountable to these principles. Encourage them to think through the implications of these principles with many others in the organization. Experiment with a design that feels congruent with the principles, and once that design is operating, observe carefully where it needs to be modified or changed. Stay with it as an experiment rather than as the perfect solution.

A second experiment can occur in every meeting, task force or event in your organization. This experiment requires a discipline of asking certain questions. Each question opens up an inquiry. We have learned that if people conscientiously ask these questions, they keep focused on critical issues such as levels of participation, commitment, and diversity of perspectives. Here are four questions we've found quite helpful:

1.   Who else needs to be here?

2.   What just happened?

3.   Can we talk?

4.   Who are we now?

The simplicity of these questions may lead you to believe they're not sufficient or important, but think about the types of inquiry they invite. Every time we ask "Who else needs to be here?" we're called to notice the system of relationships that is pertinent to the issue at hand. We're willing to be alert to who's missing, and the earlier we notice who's missing, the sooner we can include them. This question helps us move to broader participation gradually and thoughtfully, as the result of what we're learning about the issue and the organization. It's an extremely simple but powerful method for becoming good systems thinkers and organizers.

Similarly, "What just happened?" is a question that leads to learning from our experience. Since living systems always react but never obey, this question focuses us on what we might learn if we look at the reactions that just surfaced. The question moves us away from blame

and instead opens us to learning a great deal about who this system is and what grabs its attention.

When we ask, "Can we talk?" we're acknowledging that others perceive the world differently from us. Imagine leaving a typical meeting where ego battles predominated. Instead of posturing, grumbling, or politicking, what if we went up to those we disagreed with and asked to talk with them. What if we were sincerely interested in trying to see the world from their perspective? Would this enable us to work together more effectively?

"Who are we now?" is a query that keeps us noticing how we are creating ourselvesÑnot through words and position papers, but through our actions and reactions from moment to moment. All living systems spin themselves into existence because of what they choose to notice and how they choose to respond. This is also true of human organizations, so we need to acknowledge that we are constantly creating the organization through our responses. To monitor our own evolution, we need to ask this question regularly. Without such monitoring, we may be shocked to realize who we've become while we weren't watching. And for organizations that put in place a few essential patterns, like that junior high school, everyone periodically needs to review how they're doing. Are individuals and groups embodying the patterns? And are these patterns helping the organization become what people envisioned for it when the patterns were created?

But questions require us to be disciplined in asking them, a discipline we seldom practice. No matter how simple the questions, we most often rush past them. We feel compelled to act rather than to inquire. But by now, many of us in organizations want to turn away from this history of act-act-act which has led to so little learning and so much wasted energy. All other forms of life stay watchful and responsiveÑthey learn so continuously that science writer James Gleick notes that "Life learned itself into existence." Physicist and author Fritjof Capra states that there is no distinction between living and learning, "A living system is a learning system." If we don't begin to seriously focus on learning in our organizations, there is no way we can bring them to life.

Throughout this article, we've stressed the freedom to create that all life requires. We hope that you will feel inspired to exercise your freedom and creativity to experiment with some of the ideas, principles and questions we've noted. We need each other's best thinking and most courageous experiments if we are to create a future worth wanting

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ABOUT MARGARET (MEG) WHEATLEY, Ed.D.

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troubled time. She is co-founder and President emerita of The Berkana Institute, an organizational consultant since 1973, a global citizen since her youth, and a prolific writer. She has authored eight books. Her numerous articles may be downloaded free at her web site: *margaretwheatley.com*. For more biographical information, see *margaretwheatley.com/bio*