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The New Story is Ours to Tell

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Willis Harman changed my work with one lengthy letter written to me over two years ago. Willis was the best responder I've ever met. He responded to manuscripts, telephone calls, and in this experience of mine, to listening to me give a seminar. He was so gracefully responsive that I began to think his mind was connected to a printer; he only had to press "print" to send forth his comments, critiques, endorsements. How else could I explain Willis' prolific responses? If he didn't have such a print function, what did his availability say about my own slow, clumsy process for responding to requests?

In his letter, Willis urged me on in my message, but warned me to stop deriving it solely from science. As he did with so many, he wanted me to understand the deeper premises of modern science, which, for all the "new science" hoopla, were anything but new. He encouraged me to explore the deeper values and premises of my work which were far more important than any science.

I contemplated his letter for months. I realized that I was using the science to get the attention of those who could hear this message in no other form. (When I told Willis this, he laughed and applauded my clarity. If you're being Machiavellian, it's good to realize it.) Now it is two years later, and what was "my message" has grown in depth and strength into a "new story." It is sourced from many traditions, not just Western science, and I offer it to any individual or group that is willing to listen. I am less focused on persuasion and more engaged in the telling of a story that gives hope and possibility to us all. Willis is present in both the story line and in me every time I tell it.

I believe that all of us attracted to the World Business Academy and to the Institute of Noetic Science hold this new story. But I meet too many of us who falter in expressing this voice because we've been told that these ideas about leaders, organizations, and people are crazy. It is time to change this definition of craziness. We, in fact, represent *the new sanity*—the ideas and values and practices that can create a future worth wanting.

Those who carry a new story and who risk speaking it abroad have played a crucial role in times of historic shifts. Before a new era can come into form, there must be a new story. The playwright Arthur Miller noted that we know an era has ended when its basic illusions have been exhausted. I would add that these basic illusions not only are exhausted, but also have become exhausting. As they fail to produce the results we want, we just repeat them with

greater desperation, plummeting ourselves into cynicism and despair as we lock into these cycles of failure.

I was introduced to the critical nature of the teller-of-new-stories role in reading the work of physicist and author Brian Swimme. Brian, partnering with Thomas Berry, has spent the past several years developing a new story of the universe, based on their belief that creating a new cosmic story is the most important work of our times because it will usher in a new era of human and planetary health. (see *The Universe Story*, with Thomas Berry, HarperSanFrancisco, 1992)

Lest you believe that cosmic stories can only be told by physicists or theologians, their idea of a cosmic story is one that answers such questions as: What's going on? Where did everything come from? Why are you doing what you do?

I believe that you and I have an important theme to contribute to this new cosmic story. Each of us holds a story that is quite different from the dominant one of our times. I would like to contrast in some detail the new and the old stories. My hope is that in seeing the great polarities between these two, you will feel even more strongly called to give voice to the new.

For at least three hundred years, Western culture has been developing the old story. I would characterize it as a story of dominion and control, and all-encompassing materialism. This story began with a dream that it was within humankind's province to understand the workings of the universe, and to gain complete mastery over physical matter. This dream embraced the image of the universe as a grand, clockwork machine. As with any machine, we would understand it by minute dissection, we would engineer it to do what we saw fit, and we would fix it through our engineering brilliance. This hypnotic image of powers beyond previous human imagination gradually was applied to everything we looked at: our bodies were seen as the ultimate machines; our organizations had all the parts and specifications to assure well-oiled performance; and in science, where it had all begun, many scientists confused metaphor with reality and believed life *was* a machine.

This dream still has immense hypnotic power over us. For every problem, we quickly leap to technical solutions, even if technology is the cause of the initial problem. Science will still save us, no matter the earthly mess we've created. In our bodies, we long to believe the promises of genetic engineering. Our greatest ills, perhaps even death, will vanish once we identify the troubling gene. We need only invest more in technology to yield unsurpassed benefits in health and longevity, and all because we are such smart engineers of the human body.

In most of our endeavors--in science, health, organizational management, self-help--the focus is on creating better functioning machines. We replace the faulty part, reengineer the organization, install a new behavior or attitude, create a better fit, recharge our batteries. The language and thinking is all machines. And we give this image such hegemony over our lives because it seems our only hope for combating life's cyclical nature, our one hope of escape from life's incessant demands for creation and destruction.

When we created this story of complete dominion over matter, we also brought in control's unwelcome partner, fear. Once we are intent on controlling something, we can only interpret its resistance to our control as fearsome. Since nothing is as controllable as we hope, we soon

become entangled in a cycle of exerting control, failing to control, exerting harsher control, failing again. The fear that arises from this cycle is notable in many of us. It is especially notable in our leaders. Things aren't working as they had hoped, but none of us knows of any other way to proceed. The world becomes scarier and scarier as we realize the depths of our ignorance and confront our true powerlessness. It is from this place, from an acknowledgment of our ignorance and lack of power, that the call goes out for a new story.

But the old story has some further dimensions worth noticing. This story has had a particularly pernicious effect on how we think about one another, and how we approach the task of organizing any human endeavor.

When we conceived of ourselves as machines, we gave up most of what is essential to being human. We created ourselves devoid of spirit, will, passion, compassion, even intelligence. Machines have none of these characteristics innately, and none of them can be built into its specifications. The imagery is so foreign to what we know and feel to be true about ourselves that it seems strange that we ever adopted this as an accurate description of being human. But we did, and we do. A colleague of mine, as he was about to work with a group of oil company engineers, was warned that they had "heads of cement." He cheerfully remarked that it didn't matter, because they all had hearts, didn't they? "Well," they replied, "we call it a pump."

The engineering image we carry of ourselves has led to organizational lives where we believe we can ignore the deep realities of human existence. We can ignore that people carry spiritual questions and quests into their work; we can ignore that people need love and acknowledgment; we can pretend that emotions are not part of our worklives; we can pretend we don't have families, or health crises, or deep worries. In essence, we take the complexity of human life and organize it away. It is not part of the story we want to believe. We want a story of simple dimensions: people can be viewed as machines and controlled to perform with the same efficiency and predictability.

It is important to recognize that in our experience, people *never* behave like machines. When given directions, we insist on putting our unique spin on them. When told to follow orders, we resist in obvious or subtle ways. When told to accept someone else's solution, or to institute a program created elsewhere, we deny that it has sufficient value.

As leaders, when we meet with such non-mechanical responses, we've had two different options. We could criticize our own leadership, or we could blame our followers. If we the leader were the problem, perhaps we it was due to poor communication skills; perhaps we weren't visionary enough; maybe we'd chosen the wrong sales technique. If "our people" were the problem, it was because they lacked motivation, or a clear sense of responsibility, or it could be that this time we'd just been cursed with an obstinate and rebellious group. With so much blame looking for targets, we haven't taken time to stop and question our basic beliefs about each other. Are expectations of machine-like obedience and regularity even appropriate when working together?

Trying to be an effective leader in this machine story is especially exhausting. He or she (but in this story it's primarily he) is leading a group of lifeless, empty automatons who are just waiting to be filled with vision and direction and intelligence. The leader is responsible for providing everything: the organizational mission and values, the organizational structure, the plans, the

supervision. The leader must also figure out, through clever use of incentives or coercives, how to pump energy into this lifeless mass. Once the pump is primed, he must then rush hither and yon to make sure that everyone is clanking along in the same direction, at the established speed, with no diversions. It is the role of the leader to provide the organizing energy for a system that is believed to have no internal capacities for self-creation, self-organization, or self-correction.

As I reflect on the awful demands placed on leaders by the old story, I wonder how anyone could survive in that job. Yet the mechanistic story has created roles for all of us that are equally deadly. It has led us to believe that we, with our unpredictable behaviors, our passions, our independence, our creativity, our consciousness—that we are the problem rather than the blessing. While the rest of nature follows obediently in the great mechanistic parade of progress, we humans show up as rebellious and untrustworthy. Our problematic natures are the very reason we need to create organizations as we do. How else could we structure such recalcitrance into vehicles of efficient production?

In this story, such key human traits as uniqueness, free will, and creativity pose enormous problems. Machines are built to do repetitive functions that require no thought and minimal adjustment. Conformity and compliance are part of the expectations of this story. Creativity is unwanted, because it is always surprising and therefore uncontrollable. If we tolerate creative expressions, we find ourselves with unmanageable levels of diversity. A machine world is willing to sacrifice exploration for prediction. Guaranteed levels of performance are preferable to surprising breakthroughs. In our machine-organizations, we try to extinguish individuality in order to reach our goal of certainty. We trade uniqueness for control, and barter our humanness for petty performance measures.

It is one of the great ironies of our age that we created organizations to constrain our problematic human natures, and now the only thing that can save these organizations is a full appreciation of the expansive capacities of us humans.

So it is time for the new story. Our old one, with its alienating myths, is eating away at us from the inside, rotting from its core. Fewer of us can tell it with any conviction. Many more of us are beginning to understand that our experience and our beliefs tell a story that celebrates life rather than denying it. We can see these in the pronounced increase in conversations and writings about destiny, purpose, soul, spirit, love, legacy, courage, integrity, meaning. The new story is being born in these conversations. We are learning to give voice to a different and fuller sense of who we really are.

I would like to characterize the new story as a tale of life. Setting aside our machine glasses, we observe a world that exhibits life's ebullient creativity and life's great need for other life. We observe a world where creative self-expression and embracing systems of relationships are the organizing energies, where there is no such thing as an independent individual, and no need for a leader to take on as much responsibility for us as we've demanded in the past.

As I develop some of the major themes of this new story of life, I will be drawing first on the work of modern science. However, science is only adding its voice to a story that in fact is very ancient. We find this story in primal wisdom traditions, in toady's indigenous tribes, in most spiritual thought, and in poets old and new. It is a story that has never been forgotten by any of

us, and that has been held for us continually by many peoples and cultures. Yet for those of us emerging from our exhaustion with the old mechanistic tale, it feels new. And it certainly opens us to new discoveries about who we are as people, as organizations, and as leaders.

For me, one of the most wonderful contrasts of the old and new stories came from thinking about a passage I read in Kevin Kelly's book, *Out of Control* (Addison-Wesley, 1994). As he reached for language to describe life, he moved into sheer exuberance. (I always pay attention when a scientist uses poetry or exuberant language—I know that something has touched him or her at a level of awareness that I don't want to ignore.) Kelly was trying to describe the ceaseless creativity that characterizes life. He said that life gives to itself this great freedom, the freedom to become. Then he asked, "Becoming what?" and went on to answer:

"Becoming becoming. Life is on its way to further complications, further deepness and mystery, further processes of becoming and change. Life is circles of becoming, an autocatalytic set, inflaming itself with its own sparks, breeding upon itself more life and more wildness and more 'becomingness.' Life has no conditions, no moments that are not instantly becoming something more than life itself."

Kelly's passionate descriptions of processes that inflame, breed more life and wildness, create more deepness and mystery, stand in stark contrast to the expectations we have held for one another. I like to contemplate Kelly's description of life with the lives we describe when we design an organizational chart. The contrast between the two is both funny and sobering. Could we even begin to tolerate such levels of passion and creativity in our organizations? But can we survive without them?

In the 1960's, the great American poet A.R. Ammons told the same story in different and precise language (*Tape for the Turn of the Year*, W. W. Norton and Company, Inc. 1965) :

Don't establish the
boundaries
first
the squares, triangles,
boxes
of preconceived
possibility,
and then
pour
life into them, trimming
off left-over edges,
ending potential:
let centers
proliferate
from
self-justifying motions!

In both recent science and poetry we are remembering a story about life that has creativity and connectedness as its essential themes. As we use this new story to look into our organizational lives, it offers us images of organizations and leaders that are both startling and

enticing. It offers us ways of being together where our diversity--our uniqueness--is essential and revered. It offers us an arena big enough to embrace the full expression of our infinitely creative human natures. And for the first time in a long time, it offers us the recognition that we humans are, in the words of physicist Ilya Prigogine, "the most striking realization of the laws of nature." We can use ourselves and what we know about ourselves to understand the universe. By observing with new eyes the processes of creation in us, we can understand the forces that create galaxies, move continents, and give birth to stars. No longer intent on describing ourselves as the machines we thought the universe to be, we are encouraged now to describe the universe through the life we know we are.

As we look at life through the lens of human nature and human desire, we are presented with some wonderful realizations. Our own desire for autonomy and creativity is reflected in all life. Life appears as boundlessly creative, searching for new possibilities and new capacities wherever it can. Observing the diversity of life forms has become a humbling experience for many biologists. At this point, no one knows how many different species there are, or where the next forms of life will appear, except that now we even expect them to appear elsewhere in our solar system.

Life is born from this unquenchable need to be. One of the most interesting definitions of life in modern biology is that something is considered alive if it has the capacity to create itself. The term for this is *autopoiesis*--self-creation--from the same root as poetry. At the very heart of our ideas about life is this definition, that life begins from the desire to create something original, to bring a new being into form.

As I have read about and observed more consciously the incredible diversity of life, I have felt witness to a level of creativity that has little to do with the survival struggles that we thought explained everything. Newness appears not for simple utilitarian purposes, but just because it is possible to be inventive. Life gives to itself the freedom to become, as Kevin Kelly noted, because life is about discovering new possibilities, new forms of expression. Two Chilean biologists, Francisco Varela and Humberto Maturana, observe that life responds not to "survival of the fittest," but to the greater space of experimentation of "survival of the fit." Many designs, many adaptations are possible, and organisms enjoy far more freedom to experiment than we humans, with our insane demand to "Get it right the first time."

The freedom to experiment, to tinker oneself into a form of being that can live and reproduce, leads to diversity that has no bounds. In my own telling of a new cosmic story, I believe that the great forces of creation are focused on exploring newness, that newness is a primary value embraced by all life, a primary force that encourages life into new discoveries. The need and ability to create one's self is a force we see quite clearly in human experience, but which we have greatly misunderstood in our organizations.

The second great force I would like to add to this new story is that life needs to link with other life, to form systems of relationships where all individuals are better supported by the system they have created. It is impossible to look into the natural world and find a separated individual. As an African proverb states: "Alone, I have seen many marvelous things, none of which were true." Biologist Lynn Margulis expresses a similar realization when she comments that independence is a political concept, it is not a biological concept. Everywhere life displays itself as complex, tangled, messy webs of relationships. From these relationships, life creates

systems that offer greater stability and support than life lived alone. Organisms shape themselves in response to their neighbors and their environments. All respond to one another, co-evolving and co-creating the complex systems of organization that we see in nature. Life is systems-seeking. It seeks organization. Organization is a naturally occurring phenomenon. Self-organization is a powerful force that creates the systems we observe, and testifies to a world that knows how to organize from the inside out.

Self-organizing systems have the capacity to create for themselves the aspects of organization that we thought we, as leaders, had to provide. Self-organizing systems create structures and pathways, networks of communication, values and meaning, behaviors and norms. In essence, they do for themselves most of what we believed we had to do for them. Rather than thinking of organization as an imposed structure, plan, design, or role, it is clear that in life, organization arises from the interactions and needs of individuals who have decided to come together. We see the results of these relationships in the forms that arise; but it is important, especially because we are so easily seduced by material forms, to look past these manifestations to the desires for relationship that gave birth to the forms.

It is easy to observe the clash of the old and new stories in many places, but one arena where it is painfully visible is in organizations that were created to fulfill some special purpose, some important call. People came together in response to the call; they joined because they knew that more was possible by organizing together than by staying alone. Their dream of contribution required an organization to move it forward. These human desires to find meaning in one's life, to bring more good into the world, to seek out others are part of the new story.

But the clash with old beliefs and images occurs as soon as we embark on the task of creating an organization. We move back to machine ideas about structures, roles, designs, leaders. We create organizations from the outside, imposing these limiting designs on the rich desires of those who have come together. Over time, the organization that was created in response to some deep call becomes a rigid structure that impedes fulfilling that call. People come to resent the organization they created, because now it is a major impediment to their creativity, to their faith, to their purposeful dreams.

The new story holds out different images of organization; it teaches us that we, when we join together, are capable of giving birth to the form of the organization, to the plans, to the values, to the vision. All of life is self-organizing and so are we. But the new story also details a process for organizing that stands in shocking contrast to the images of well-planned, well-orchestrated, well-supervised organizing. I can summarize the organizing processes of life quite simply: Life seeks organization, but it uses messes to get there. Organization is a process, not a structure. Simultaneously, and in ways difficult to chart, the process of organizing involves creating relationships around a shared sense of purpose, exchanging and creating information, learning constantly, paying attention to the results of our efforts, co-adapting, co-evolving, developing wisdom as we learn, staying clear about our purpose, being alert to changes from all directions. Living systems give form to their organization, and evolve those forms into new ones, because of exquisite capacities to create meaning together, to communicate, and to notice what's going on in the moment. These are the capacities that give any organization its true liveliness, that support self-organization.

In the new story, we enter a world where life gives birth to itself in response to powerful forces, the imperative to create one's self as an exploration of newness, and the need to reach out for relationships with others to create systems. I could similarly describe these as the forces of creativity and freedom, and the need to join with others for purposes that enrich both the individual and the system. These forces do not disappear from life, whatever approach we take to leadership, organizing, or relating. Even if we deny them, we never extinguish them. They are always active, even in the most repressive human organizations. Life can never stop asserting its need to create itself, and life never stops searching for connections.

We fail to acknowledge these unstoppable forces of life whenever we, as leaders, try to direct and control those in our organization. Life always pushes back against our demands. But instead of learning about life, we tend to see their "difficult" behaviors as justification for a more controlling style of leadership. I believe that many of the failures and discontents in today's organizations can be understood as the result of this denial of life's forces, and the pushing back of life against a story that excludes them.

As an example of these competing forces, think about how many times you have engaged in conversations about "resistance to change." I have participated in far too many of these, and in the old days, when I still thought that it was me who was "managing" change, my colleagues and I always were thoughtful enough to plan a campaign to overcome this resistance. Contrast this view of human resistance to change with Kelly's images of life as "further processes of becoming and change . . . circles of becoming, inflaming itself with its own sparks, breeding upon itself more life and more wildness." Who's telling the right story? Do we, as a species, dig in our heels while the rest of life is engaged in this awesome dance of creation? Are we the only problem, whereas the rest of life participates in something wild and wonderful?

The old story asserts that resistance to change is a fact of life. Locked into a world image that sought stability and control, change has always been undesired and difficult. But the new story explains resistance not as a fact of life, but as evidence of an act against life. Life is in motion, constantly creating, exploring, discovering. Newness is its desire. Nothing alive, including us, resists these great creative motions. But all of life resists control. All of life pushes back against any process that inhibits its freedom to create itself.

In organizations of the old story, plans and designs are constantly being imposed. People are told what to do all the time. As a final insult, we go outside the organization to look for answers, returning with benchmarks that we offer up as great gifts. Yet those in the organization can only see these packaged solutions as insults. Their creativity has been dismissed, their opportunity to discover something new for the organization has been denied. When we deny life's need to create, life pushes back. We label it resistance and invent strategies to overcome it. But we would do far better if we changed the story and learned how to invoke the resident creativity of those in our organization. We need to work with these insistent creative forces or they will be provoked to work against us.

And most organizations deny the systems-seeking, self-organizing forces that are always present, the forces that, in fact, are responsible for uncharted levels of contribution and innovation. These fail to get reported because they occur outside "the boxes of preconceived possibility." There is no better indicator of the daily but unrecognized contributions made by people than when a municipal union decides to "work to rule." These unions are prohibited

from going on strike. But they have developed an effective form of protest against problematic working conditions. They work *only* according to the rule book. They *only* follow policies and job descriptions. Even though the rule books and policy manuals were designed to create productive employees, as soon as they take them literally, cities cease running, effective civil functioning stops. What they demonstrate so forcefully is that no organization can function on the *planned* contributions of its members. Every organization relies intensely on its members going beyond the rules and roles. The organization relies on its members to figure out what needs to be done, to solve unexpected problems, to contribute in a crisis situation. But although organizations depend on this self-organizing activity, leaders seldom acknowledge this experience and use it to question beliefs about structure, leadership, or human motivation.

We also deny these system-seeking forces when we narrow people to self-serving work, when we pit colleagues against one another to improve performance, when we believe people are most strongly motivated by promises of personal gain. If we deny people's great need for relationships, for systems of support, for work that connects to a larger purpose, they push back. They may respond first by embracing competition, but then lose interest in the incentives. Performance falls back to pre-contest levels. In organizations driven by greed, people push back by distrusting and despising their leaders. In organizations that try to substitute monetary rewards for a true purpose, people respond with apathy and disaffection.

It is possible to look at the negative and troubling behaviors in organizations today as the clash between the forces of life and the forces of domination, between the new story and the old. Once we realize that we cannot ever extinguish these creative forces, that it is impossible to deny the life that lives in our organizations, we can begin to search for new ways of being together.

In many different places, the new story is emerging. It is, in its essence, a story about the human spirit. This realization is surfacing in many different disciplines and people. For those who have focused on organizations, I find it delightful to note that two great management thinkers, Edward Deming, the great voice for quality in organizations, and Robert Greenleaf, the prophet of servant leadership, both focused on the human spirit in their final writings. Deming concluded his long years of work by stating simply that quality was about the human spirit. As we grew to understand that spirit, we would create organizations of quality. Greenleaf understood that we stood as servants to the human spirit, that it was our responsibility to nurture that spirit. Following different paths, they arrived at the same centering place. We can create the lives and organizations we desire only by understanding the enlivening spirit in us that always is seeking to express itself.

Leaders who live in the new story help us understand ourselves differently by the way they lead. They trust our humanness; they welcome the surprises we bring to them; they are curious about our differences; they delight in our inventiveness; they nurture us; they connect us. They trust that we can create wisely and well, that we seek the best interests of our organization and our community, that we want to bring more good into the world.

We who hold this story feel both its beauty and its promise. What might we create if we lived our lives closer to the human spirit? What might our organizations accomplish if they trusted and called on that spirit? I want us to be telling this story in healthcare organizations, on campuses, in schools, in religious denominations, in corporations. I want us to stop being quiet

in the presence of business people who sit on our boards and in our executive offices. As they offer *their* story as the standard, I want our voices to emerge with what we know to be true. I want traditional business/economic logic to stop being the only story; I want business/economic imperatives to stop moving us away from the deeper realities we know. Even in the for-profit sector where it still dominates, the old story has not created organizations that are sustainable over time or welcoming of the human spirit. Why would we continue to let such thinking move unchallenged into other types of organization?

I would like to end by returning to the historic importance of the teller of new stories. When it is time for a new story to emerge, holding onto the past only intensifies our dilemma. We experience our ineffectiveness daily, and if we fail to find anything new, we descend more deeply into a profound sense of lost.

What we ask of the tellers of the new story is their voice and their courage. We do not need them to create a massive training program, a global-wide approach, a dramatic style. We only need them to speak to us when we are with them. We need them to break their silence and share their ideas of the world as they have come to know it.

If you carry this story within you, it is time to tell it, wherever you are, to whomever you meet. Brian Swimme compares our role to that of the early Christians. They had nothing but ". . . a profound revelatory experience. They did nothing—nothing but wander about telling a new story." As with these early believers, Brian encourages us to become wanderers, telling our new story. Through our simple wanderings, we will "ignite the transformation of humanity."

And he leaves us with a promise (from *Evolution Extended*, Connie Barlow Ed., MIT Press, 1994, p 297):

"What will happen when the storytellers emerge? What will happen when 'the primal mind' sings of our common origin, our stupendous journey, our immense good fortune? We will become Earthlings. We will have evoked out of the depths of the human psyche those qualities enabling our transformation from disease to health. They will sing our epic of being, and stirring up from our roots will be a vast awe, an enduring gratitude, the astonishment of communion experiences, and the realization of cosmic adventure."

What a wonderful promise. I invite you into the telling.



ABOUT MARGARET (MEG) WHEATLEY, Ed.D.

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