



A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

The FURROW

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Working the Way
Life Works

September 2019

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NOT SO SPECIAL

It happened years ago. I was standing in a room of about a hundred women religious, at an assembly of some kind. I'd just finished presenting a set of ideas I hoped would help open minds and stimulate new thinking – ideas about life and living systems, complexity and self-organisation, system change and system failure – and now I found myself in the firing line.

They were arguing with each other and with me. The room was split, as rooms often are, between the noisy 'far-left', the noisy 'far-right' and the long, silent middle ground. They blamed each other. They blamed me. They blamed the ideas I'd presented, which were challenging in ways that some loved and others didn't like one bit. They were deadlocked, unable to really listen to each other.

As I stood in the midst of their to-ing and fro-ing and struggling, not knowing what on earth to do, I heard myself say: "*You're not that special you know.*" The thought had escaped my lips before I could think the better of it and in the silence that followed you could have heard a pin drop.

NOT SPECIAL?

I was a relative newcomer to the inner workings of religious life at the time but subsequent years and layers of experience support that spontaneous, candid observation. Religious institutions have far more in common with other organisations than their members might like to think. As someone with a foot in both camps - the so-called spiritual and the so-called secular - I see all organisations as groups of people organised for a purpose and I observe the patterns that play out in religious life playing out elsewhere too.

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Those who have dedicated their lives to God and community may believe they're special - we all like to think our case is particular - but contextual nuances aside, what's striking is how commonplace their issues are.

I work with people and organisations on issues of culture and change, and what I've noticed is that both secular and religious institutions are seriously out of balance. They're just unbalanced in different directions. And like most differences, this one can teach us something.

A QUESTION OF STORY

At its simplest, the problem most institutions share is one of 'story'. The story we tell ourselves about how the world works and our place in it. The story we're working with throughout the developed world is so deeply embedded in our psyche and practices that we're no longer aware of it. It's become our common sense, a legacy of Newtonian science and a three-hundred-year-old belief system that persists to this day even though scientific understanding has long since moved on.

Isaac Newton's worldview was grounded in the belief that we live in an orderly, linear world, where causes lead to known effects and where it's possible to make simple links between actions and consequences. Let's call this '*the story of the machine*'.

If you see the world in this way you operate with certain assumptions: that everything is ultimately predictable, controllable and manageable. That all problems have answers; we just have to find them (or experts who have them). That if we can figure out the rules by which the machine works, we can improve it or fix it, just as a mechanic tweaks the engine to improve the car's performance. When you're driven by this story you spend a lot of time breaking complex things into smaller parts that you can investigate and manage. You focus on the parts.

The story of the machine now shapes our approach to pretty much everything - from economics to education, from transport to housing, from medicine to farming, from food production to media production - and it affects our notions of how to organise, manage and change things in ways that are profound. We have compartmentalised our lives, carved out our territories, heightened the walls and closed the doors. This bit's ours. We see the world beyond as separate and disconnected with boundaries and borders everywhere. And our language supports this. You, me. Us, them. Here, there. Then, now. We focus on *our* part.

But the powerful new lens of science has unravelled the threads of that old story and revealed a deeper truth, something mystics

intuited all along: *everything is connected*. Wherever we look, through a microscope or telescope, we see nestedness in every direction. Systems within systems within systems. Increasing levels of wholeness.

This has set the stage for a whole new story of the world as a *living system*, a complex web of relationships in which things are connected in myriad ways. An interdependent world in which everything affects everything else and is affected by everything else. A non-linear world where the links between causes and effects are blurred, at best. A world that is not controlled and kept in shape by people who are 'in charge' but a self-organising world that makes itself as the parts of the system enter into relationship with each other. An emergent world that is unfolding moment by moment.

If you work with *this* story, you make very different assumptions. You assume that life is complex and that you cannot 'know' it in any definitive way. Nor can you control it or manage it in any conventional way. Instead of reducing complexity to a simplicity you can understand and manage by taking it apart, you go in another direction entirely. You focus on the relationships *between* things and you learn to work skilfully in that space.

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SYSTEM FAILURE

In many ways the multiple crises we are facing now - and our inability to resolve them or to change our complex systems - are the inevitable consequence of a clash between the way *we think* life works and the way life *really* works. The fairytale of the machine has collided headlong into the reality of living systems. We have literally run out of road.

For nearly two decades now, I've been driven by questions like, what does it mean to treat people and organisations as living systems, not dead machines? How can we bring the innate intelligence of natural systems into the organisations that shape the world we live in to improve how we conduct our human affairs?

I've committed myself to the work of mainstreaming these ideas by introducing them as simply as possible to people in all walks of life - by now, many thousands of them. The response is so consistent it's clear to me this new story speaks to us at a primal level.

These ideas strike a particular chord in *religious settings* as people join the dots and make connections in every direction. The lens of living systems offers a way to understand the failures in congregational life and in the institutional Church. For me, the

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Church is both a metaphor and a case study in how manmade systems founded on patriarchy, hierarchy, subtle oppression, a flawed worldview, and a stubborn refusal to evolve in response to a changing context, quietly and inevitably crumble.

In recent years I've been privileged to work alongside many congregations as they attempt to renew and evolve their way of life. I've worked with women with the courage to throw open the windows and doors, let in a little fresh air and try something new. Together we've held open the space of possibility with systems-inspired participative, relational practices.

Through this work I've witnessed practices that echo the leading edge in organisation and human development. Days often begin with silence, meditation or some kind of reflection. People cook and eat together, work and play together. They talk things through and make time for collective conversation – quantities of time unheard of in other walks of life. They value ritual and ways of knowing beyond the rational. They appreciate the potential of embodiment – song, dance, movement. They use contemplative dialogue to slow things down. In a world fixated by goals, outcomes and measurement, they *trust process*. They even tick the box on shared ownership which for many theorists on the future of organising, dynamic governance and distributed decision-making, is the holy grail.

Taken together, all of this adds up to a set of conditions people in other walks of life can only dream about. And yet, as I've discovered, it's insufficient. They did these things, but not altogether well.

After a lifetime of pioneering participatory practice, the veteran social scientist John Heron came to believe that groups misfire because they misunderstand or fail to pay attention to, one of three dimensions of group life: meaning, values or structure.

I've witnessed religious groups struggle with all three. Here I focus on *structure*.

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ORGANISING AND ORGANISATION

Remember that old tv commercial for Nestle's Kit Kat back in the eighties? - two voices engaged in an argument about the chocolate snack that went something like this:

It's a biscuit.

It's a bar.

It's a biscuit.

It's a bar.

It's a *biscuit*! It's a *bar*! [PAUSE]

It's a biscuit... *in a bar*.

It comes to mind whenever religious 'insiders' tell me "*We're not an organisation, you know. We're a community.*" Somewhere along the way 'community' became sanctified and 'organisation' vilified. Apart from the naiveté - and subtle snobbery - of the distinction, I've learned from experience that 'community' and 'organisation' are false opposites. A religious congregation, a government department, a corporate multinational, a political party, a non-profit - *any* group of people organised for *any* purpose - is both an organisation *and* a community. A biscuit *in a bar*.

Here, the lens of living systems is clarifying. At its most fundamental, every living system - a wheat field, a river catchment, a school, a townland, you, me - *everything*, is a system of relationship, the product or outcome of the way the parts of the system interact and work together. Whatever the system, it's the relationships and interactions between the parts that makes the things we experience, touch and feel, what they are.

My father assembled bicycles his whole life and I can reliably confirm that there's nothing about random piles of rims, spokes, frames, handlebars, chains and so on to suggest that, when put together, they'll be capable of transporting the weight of a human body. And yet that's precisely what they do. *When organised in particular ways, relationships become structures that create capacity.* Until they're assembled however, and in just the right way, the separate parts have no capability at all.

What's true of a mechanical system like a bicycle or a Boeing, is true of living systems too, with one important difference. *For a mechanical system to endure, the relationship between the parts must stay the same. For a living system to endure, the relationships must adapt and change.*

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Despite everything we now know about living systems, the logic of the machine continues to hang like a smog, pervading the way we think about pretty much everything. Organisations are still conceptualised as collections of parts arranged neatly from 'top' to 'bottom'. To improve an organisation you set about 'fixing' the parts (the people) - especially the '*smart*' parts (at the 'top') - enabling them to develop and fulfil their potential. The embedded assumption here is that as the 'smart parts' develop and improve they'll develop and improve the wider organisational culture. Fix the parts and you fix the system. That's the logic.

But what if that's not how it actually works? The renowned quality pioneer and management thinker W Edwards Deming, whose ideas are credited with Japan's rise from the ashes of the second World War, devoted his life to the study and improvement of organisations – working well into his nineties – and he concluded that the system *as a whole*, is primary.

Of course personal transformation matters. Before anything changes, someone somewhere has to change. Revolution on the outside is powered by evolution on the inside. *But it's not enough.*

If we want to improve the nature and quality of what an organisation *actually produces* – its products, its services – and *how it performs* – its impact on its members, its contribution to the world – the master key is structure. What matters most is how it's organised. *How it works.* Western culture deifies the individual, the leader, the hero. But performance, Deming discovered, is not personal. It's more than ninety per cent governed by the system itself.

In *religious congregations*, people long ago reached the same conclusion: our structures are the problem, they say. It turns out they're right, though they're not alone. One legacy of the mechanistic era is a widespread and profound organisational illiteracy. There's precious little systems-awareness around so there's little appreciation of the link between relationship and structure – *how things work together*. Or the link between structure and process – how we do the work together.

This illiteracy has led to imbalance and system failure everywhere. In religious life, I've seen organisational issues inappropriately spiritualised, psychologised, personalised or avoided entirely. I've also seen significant organisational initiatives embarked upon with insufficient process design to support productive engagement and insufficient structure to take forward emergent outcomes. I've seen people made dizzy by the stop-start dynamic: out with the old, in with the new. Whims, fads and half-baked ideas are poor substitutes for sustained organisational and human development and a continuity of focus. Many religious are worn out and disillusioned and it's hard to blame them.

Organisational illiteracy has fuelled an epidemic of disengagement everywhere. In the secular world people happily 'reorganise' and 'restructure' but pay scant attention to the subtle territory of human interaction and relationships. In contrast, people in religious life easily embrace the personal and interpersonal stuff – attitudes, beliefs, awareness, skills – but have failed to radically redesign how their systems actually work.

The point is, these territories are not separate. *They're two sides of the same coin.* Neglect issues of organisation and organising, and

relationships and community inevitably suffer. Unless you balance attention between both territories it's possible you'll end up with neither a functioning organisation nor a functioning community.

To change the culture of our organisations, we have to change *how* these systems work. In practice that means moving our attention from the parts – how the people work – to the whole – how the people work *together*.

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CHAPTER

Perhaps the clearest evidence that ways of organising in religious life need an overhaul is the Chapter process. In theory, Chapter is such a brilliant idea. Democracy in action. Most people would give their eye teeth to shape the direction and policy of their workplace the way religious communities are invited to shape theirs.

Why then do I hear more and more religious say: “*We can’t do this anymore*”? Why did a friend on the eve of her Congregation’s international Chapter, email saying: “*It feels like Custer’s last stand.*”

The current model is clearly past its sell-by date and yet it persists, part of a whole architecture of processes and practices that have not evolved to accommodate a *new time* and *new needs*. Chapter, visitation, extended leadership meetings, assemblies and so on are organisational routines that prevail out of habit, rather than relevance. Despite the pent-up desire for change, and lots of talking about it, there is precious little genuine experimentation.

The typical Chapter process calls to mind one of my favourite Monty Python sketches, a parody of the seventies TV programme, *Mastermind*, in which ordinary people would amaze us with their mastery of esoteric fields of knowledge. The sketch begins with the show’s host welcoming this week’s contestant, John Cleese, with the familiar question: “*And what is your chosen subject?*” to which Cleese replies, perversely, “*The world and everything in it.*”

That’s what Chapter feels like. That’s what happens when key decisions can only be made every four to six years. When the central decision-making forum happens so infrequently, ‘the world and everything in it’ can find its way onto the agenda – *absolutely everything* – rendering it obtuse, overloaded, overlong and exhausting. If participants try to ‘game’ the outcome it’s not because they’re bad people but because there are too few opportunities to meaningfully participate in the decisions that shape their lives. This may be their one and only chance. Fold into the mix the politics and manipulation that elections can spark and you have a perfect pressure-cooker environment, almost guaranteed not to work well,

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and certainly a shadow of the authentic democracy people aspire to.

Things worsen when you pile the outcome of a poor process onto a sparse structure. Poorly structured groups are good at talking, not so good at getting things done. Their meetings may generate emotion and energy but they aren't capable of producing results.

In religious life, a combination of weak structure and the one-out-all-out discontinuity of leadership means there's nowhere for Chapter outcomes to properly land and take root. So they're added to the to-do list of usually overworked, often under-resourced leadership teams whose job is to keep the existing show on the road while trying to fulfill often poorly articulated dreams pulled hurriedly out of a hat in a heated Chapter setting. Without a *process* designed to crystallise ambitions or a *structure* to translate them into sustained action over time, dreams easily melt away.

After a lifetime of this, no wonder people ask, what's the point?

There's nothing special going on here, of course. What's happening in religious life is just a microcosm of a deep-seated dysfunction in how we organise our affairs more generally and evidence that the longer we work through mechanisms that are obsolete, the further we drift from reality. People are now taking to the streets in complete despair at the failure of our institutions to properly address a plethora of chronic and worsening issues, from healthcare to homelessness to climate change, issues that are staring us in the face, requiring us to mount responses equal to their challenge.

What's the matter with us? Why on earth are we not responding?

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WORKING THE WAY LIFE WORKS

The call for change in the structure and culture of our organisations has become a permanent feature of public life. In *religious settings*, questions of structure are frequently debated, alternative models imagined and sketched, constitutions updated. That so little changes suggests this is not how change actually happens.

Once you appreciate that the systems we have are the net result of how we interact and work together, it becomes obvious that 'change' is not an abstraction, an initiative planned for some other time. It is concrete and practical and it happens right here, right now or not at all. Seen through a living systems lens, the 'structures' holding us hostage are not reporting lines on organisational charts but social processes: ways of organising in the real world. And that's our opportunity.

In the long shadow cast by ‘the machine’, a body of cultural practices has been quietly germinating into a whole new way of working together, ready to meet this evolutionary moment. I call it ‘*Working the Way Life Works*’: an evolving repertoire of practical ways for us to think and work together as whole-systems. All the evidence shows that ordinary people working in well-designed conversational infrastructures can create better results than an elite corps working inside a poorly designed process.

This collaborative way of working is taking multiple forms, from bottom-up organisational renewal rooted in inquiry-based conversational processes to large scale initiatives aimed at nudging whole system change over time. Right across the world, new ways of organising are emerging within and between the boundaries of formal institutions, showing up as pockets of experimentation, ecologies of learning around some of the most complex issues of our time: food, finance, energy, climate, education, poverty, healthcare.

The only way to think in a non-linear, systemic way is *together*. Joined-up-thinking requires joined-up-practice. This is the meta shift of our time, one that requires a new mindset and a new skillset: *thinking like an ecosystem by working as an ecosystem*.

I passionately believe the only way to change the organisations that are shaping our culture is to make nine-to-five work the subject of active experimentation: to *change the way we organise and organise for change*. Whatever it is, the issue confronting us *is always* potential raw material for the change we want to see and the perfect opportunity to do things differently and do different things. *Change is the work*. As Richard Rohr observes, “*We do not think ourselves into new ways of living. We live ourselves into new ways of thinking.*”

Working on the work, right here right now, in a new way, is the new ‘structure’ in the making.

SYSTEMIC LEADERSHIP

None of this just happens. Organisational culture is changed by design – not in theory or on paper but by deliberately disturbing the current system in a new direction.

While hierarchies need strong leaders who assume control and give us confidence that someone’s in charge, democracies need robust processes; authentic opportunities for people to engage with issues that matter and well-designed processes that can mine the system’s intelligence. As we organise in new ways to address complex problems, we need leaders who can liberate people and organisations from outmoded ways of working that stifle progress

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and replace them with stable platforms for ongoing, emergent change. As we make the transition from the machine age to the age of living systems, we will need fewer engineers in leadership roles and more gardeners, leaders who can cultivate new spaces of possibility, nurture ongoing emergent change, work iteratively, watch what happens, respond, adapt, and evolve over time.

Working in congregational settings has taught me that even modest attempts at working in new ways can make an impact. I've witnessed firsthand how simply disturbing the timing of tired routines can significantly alter the outcome.

Redirecting the inward focus of religious life and requiring people to engage with outsiders in a spirit of exploration and learning can spark new thinking and change the content of decision-making. Talking and working together in a spirit of authentic and sustained participation creates a cultural space where relationships can deepen and with that the feeling of belonging to something larger than ourselves. Above all, I've learned that it's not enough to have a shared endeavour – a common purpose, mission, ministry, whatever. What matters even more is *how you do it*. The elusive thing we call 'community' is the by-product of something else and that 'something else' is *a way of working together*.

A whole new way of organising – inspired by life.

Single minded in our love of God. Isn't it strange that people admire the great personal sacrifices involved in climbing Mount Everest or going to the North Pole, or painters like Gauguin who left his Paris banking career and his wife and died in misery for the sake of his art – and begrudge us for discovering God, and the love which gives meaning to all other loves? It been said that the only field of research in which man may make no sacrifice under pain of being called a 'fanatic' is God! Ultimately they will be converted when they see you happy and fulfilled.

– SISTER MARY DAVID, *The Joy of God* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum) p. 18.