

A Commitment to Emergence — The Inner and Outer of Evolutionary Leadership

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With Kinde Nebeker
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Emergence is a term that is used often these days, and in many fields, including the field of leadership and development. It is the phenomenon of something arising from the interaction of separate parts. OK, seemingly separate, yet really connected bits of a system. That's what many of us are learning, right? To see what our brains are trained to see as separate, but then dare to glimpse it as a whole, a system of connection that is much more dynamic and complex. It takes a commitment to see that way, doesn't it.



It turns out an Aspen tree isn't just a tree, one among many in a forest, but rather, a connected system of underground roots that occasionally pop up as, what we see as a tree beside another tree. With emergence — in this case the system of trees — what arises is not a property of the individuals,

but is a property of the group. The forest is the emergence. Aha!

In the 1990s I was part of several leadership conferences offered in the beautiful Wasatch Mountains at Sundance Utah, where there are a lot of Aspens. Sundance is the resort that Robert Redford built and was original host to the Sundance Film Festival. Those conferences were on "Self-Organizing Systems," lead by my friends (and bosses at the time) Margaret Wheatley and Myron Rogers. They were three-day gatherings with up to sixty people who wanted to learn of this self-organizing paradigm. Some were consultants. Some were internal leadership. Some were community leaders. Some were C-level in corporations. It was a beautiful place to learn, and that brought out the beauty of those people together.

One of the guest presenters at those conferences was Fritjof Capra, the Austrian Physicist, renowned for his writings (including *The Tao of Physics*, *The Turning Point*) and his work at Berkeley's Center for Ecoliteracy. Fritjof, like Meg and Myron, like many of us that have continued this work, was studying the qualities of living systems, including emergence, and applying those learnings and principles to human systems — teams, organizations, communities.

I remember Fritjof describing an example of sugar in one of his teachings — though he seemed to be thinking it out loud and coming up with the example in the moment. "Sugar is a mix of three elements: carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen, none of which are sweet." He continued, "the sweetness," he paused to peer out into that beautiful forested Sundance setting, "is in, the relationship. It is not in the parts." In making that statement, his peering outside came back to those of us inside. He'd made a discovery, which got a good chuckle from all of us — in the way that in-the-moment simplicity does.

The sweetness is in the relationship. The property of sweetness is not found in carbon by itself. Nor in hydrogen. More in oxygen. The property of sweetness, is what emerges from the interaction of these elements. Fun, right.

What does emergence mean for human systems?

It means that it is important for us to not just learn about the theoretical concept of emergence, but to welcome it as a practice of seeing and a way of being. You know, like how ways of seeing make visible things that have always been there but nobody has seen — it's a forest, not just a tree. It's a community, not just a person. Like when you are thinking of getting a red car and you start noticing all the red cars on the road. They were always there. It just feels like they came from nowhere.



Emergence is a commitment that requires practice. It is an attitude that requires dedication — like those three times per week of cardio rather than once a month. Emergence is a disposition and way of seeing that requires being willing to be surprised.

Emergence is also what is at the heart of the series that my friend and colleague, Kinde Nebeker, and I are creating and exploring through *The Inner and Outer of Evolutionary Leadership*. This naming itself came from an emergent process, a welcoming of surprise. In 2015, Kinde and I — who had been

friends for several years — knew that we wanted to explore a next layer of work together.

Kinde is a kind and thoughtful person, just as her name suggests. She is appreciative. She has a lot of wonder in her. After spending the better part of a day together in my home, beginning to explore this work, we were asking each other what we should call it. Kinde blurted it out, “The Inner and Outer of

Evolutionary Leadership.” It was spoken with aha. With, “what if” and sparkles in her eye. A bit like Fritjof and his discovery about sugar.

The sweetness is in the relationship — which sometimes is people learning and wondering together. The sweet congealing of a day of sharing conversations, stories, questions — far from any planning of details — to an important and interesting “aha!”

Emergence and the Inner

From the inner, emergence is central to evolutionary leadership. It is becoming more comfortable with watching for what arises. It means letting go of some expectations. It means welcoming surprise. It means releasing ego. It means paying equal attention to the invisible that is arising as it does paying attention to charts and graphs. It means less imposing a will or option or bias so as to win. It means more willing to mix opinions and questions.

That takes a commitment, right? I do a lot of work convening people and systems together. I'm a facilitator. I help design and lead meetings so that people can be smarter together — the sweetness is in the relationship. I employ varied participative approaches to connect people to one another. Conversation is a big part of that. Dialogue. Inquiry. Pausing. Silence. These are all things that create intentional conditions in human systems for a deliberate emergence to occur. And all of them require a changed inner being, a willing inner being.

Emergence and the Outer

From the outer, emergence is about convening. It's about helping people connect in ways that interrupt norms of isolation and separation. I use many forms to help with this. The Circle Way is core and central, particularly in working with smaller groups. I use World Cafe and Open Space Technology often with larger groups. It would be easy to say that these are just dialogic methods. They are that. But what you ask of each other in those methodologies matters, and makes it a whole lot more than just methodology. Inviting people to share stories and ask questions create conditions to wander a bit together, and for a different kind of emergence to occur. *Mixing people to create multiple points of contact — this creates the conditions for emergence.* Emergence in human systems. Aha. Something that was not planned.

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My friend and colleague Chris Corrigan has offered one of my favorite references to emergence. Chris is insightful. Smart as hell. And kind. He's really good at connecting ideas and spitting out learnings as story. His definition of emergence is concise. "It's when everyone leaves the party with something that nobody came with." Emergence comes from interaction. It's the buzz. The vibe from the party. You can't plan every encounter at a party — are you crazy. You can't script it. You can't manage it. Yes, you can set some context and general shape. Hors d'oeuvres around the coffee table, great! Dinner at the dining room table, great. A card game. You can plan conditions. You can't plan outcomes. Or shouldn't trick ourselves into thinking that we can plan outcomes.

Cosmologist and spiritual teacher Brian Swimme has a response to a riddle about the creation story of earth. What happens when you mix hydrogen, carbon, oxygen and leave it for 13.8 billion years? Opera. Opera is the answer. Emergence is the explanation.

It seems to me that as we evolve as human beings — individually and collectively — many of us are learning that our willingness to welcome emergence is a very important skill and disposition. To see what was once thought separate, and reintegrate not just what we see, but what we are inside. That's commitment. That's an evolution. And we might just surprise ourselves with more sweet opera.



Tenneson Woolf (tennesonwoolf.com) and Kinde Nebeker (newmoonritesofpassage.com) are long-time friends that have become colleagues, drawn to each others work and interests. Together they are exploring many aspects of evolutionary leadership, including the practices for the inner and the outer. They offer workshops and presentations, that invite attention to emergence, and the sweetness of relationships that creates it.