

Art of Hosting Story -- Following the Life Energy

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For Peggy Holman's Book, *Engaging Emergence: Turning Upheaval into Opportunity*
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In early 2008 Chris Corrigan referred some work to me with CUPE (Canadian Union of Public Employees). They were a group of labour educators ready to awaken further to the life energy in their work. To the kind of life energy that runs deeply in most labour unions -- deep commitments to community, fairness, equity, and social justice. They were also a group that was a bit stuck in the way that Peggy describes -- struggling for ways through the chaos that members face in rapidly changing workplaces and a rocky economy.

I spent a day designing participative change processes with four CUPE educators and my Art of Hosting colleagues, Nancy Fritsche Eagan and Angela Amel. We were preparing for a group of 30 participants and a four day strategic planning session. We recommended principles that included heartfulness, passion, and commitment. The CUPE team cautioned us. Warmly, but with caution as Nancy, Angela and I spoke our version of invitation to follow life-energy. "Our people eat people like your for lunch." We were attentive, but not particularly phased. All of us had been deliberately inviting life-energy into or work for some time.

The next day the process or arriving began well. We began with a circle checkin. We invited people to share some of the story of their passion that brought them to their work. The unsticking began. In a pattern common in the Art of Hosting, we progressed from this arrival through to broadening learning, rolling up our sleeves in project work, and commitments to action to take this work out of the room. The CUPE educators knew there could be better, fluid strategies to offer their work. Everything from redesigning pension education programs to creating more green materials to creating a new culture of learning.

Through the methods we taught and practiced together, through the holistic practices, and through the organizational paradigms and models that resonated with the organization they were working in, these CUPE educators found a way to free and follow the life energy. I remember clearly the satisfaction, the joy that they felt to work on their projects. One in particular from the then director, Morna Balantyne. During a cafe, I asked her how she felt it was going. She told me it was good. Yet, she seemed a bit preoccupied. She then explained to me how she was concerned about a workshop she needed to facilitate within the next few weeks. She was working on during the morning and nights before and after the planning session. I suggested she invite her colleagues in the open space sessions to work on it with her. In a 75 minute session with six or seven of us, 90% of the concept was clear. From concern to hope. Strain to lightness. Stuck to flowing.

That flowing energy from the planning session led to another CUPE session on empowering local union leaders, then expanded out into the CUPE regions across Canada, into the coalitions that CUPE works with, into a Canadian Labour Congress learning circle, and then into the Canadian Auto Workers, the BC Government Employees Unions, and the Canadian Media Guild. All were taking up the mantle, redesigning their conferences and adopting participatory methods and leadership. This is all happening right now largely within the fields of union education and activism, but it has definitely been about cultivating energy and seeing where it leads.

Cathy Remus, one of CUPE's education leaders, described the Art of Hosting changes and changes in energy this way.

"What if agendas could be invitations? "Us and them" could be a circle? Purpose could be as important as the "to do" list? What if we spent time on questions we don't know the answer to, instead of leading people to the "right" answers?"

As people who work for public sector union members, for workers who care for people and communities, we know in our bones that disruption is the only thing that makes the world a better place. Whether we're walking picket lines for fair wages and healthy, safe workplaces, or representing workers who need a second chance, or sitting down in the streets of Seattle, or Copenhagen, or Ottawa, for a world that puts people and the planet before profit.

But authentic, positive change can only break through when people are respected for everything they are, when we create space for our stories, for beauty in the middle of a "work" meeting, for strategies and actions that resonate in our hearts as well as our minds."

Stuck to flowing. Blocked to life seeing and following life energy. Delivering new programs. Creating the next level of new community.