# ENGAGING EMERGENCE

## Turning Upheaval into Opportunity

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An Excerpt From

# *Engaging Emergence: Turning Upheaval into Opportunity*

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*The real voyage of discovery consists
not in seeking new lands, but in seeing
with new eyes.*

—Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*

Albert Einstein famously observed, "No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it." Too often, we use tired change strategies to address complex problems, only to be frustrated by the results. Fortunately, emergence, a naturally occurring pattern of change, provides an alternative. Should we choose to work with it, emergence can take us to a new level of change-making competence. Simply put, emergence is order arising out of chaos.

This book is about working with emergent change. While others have explored what emergence is, this book also focuses on how to engage it. It prepares you to face disruptions and invite the people you work or live with to realize new possibilities together. To help you find your way, I describe a fundamental *pattern* of change and then offer *practices*, *principles*, and *questions* for engaging emergence.

As creative partners with emergence, we can ride its rapids into organizations, communities, and a world more alive, healthy, and engaging. The more we understand and work with emergence, the more we increase the possibility of outcomes such as government in which partisan differences lead to creative, breakthrough legislation rather than gridlock or compromises that no one likes.

## Is This Book for You?

Are you facing upheaval, disturbance, dissonance, in some aspect of your work or life? If so, you're in good company with automakers, schoolteachers, bankers, electronics manufacturers, information technology professionals, journalists, and others who have lost jobs or experienced their industry faltering. Have you noticed the rich diversity of capabilities, cultures, and aspirations among us? Have you ever wondered how we can become more capable together than we are alone?

If you seek courage, hope, and faith despite struggle or collapse, this book offers a path to a brighter future.

- *Engaging Emergence* presents both compelling ideas and powerful actions for working with uncertainty, upheaval, dissonance, and change.

- It is for leaders, both formal and informal—managers, officials, community leaders, opinion leaders, change practitioners, activists, and change agents of all sorts—who face complex, important issues and seek creative alternatives for addressing them.

- It provides insight into the intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual landscapes that upheaval evokes in most of us, fostering compassion for ourselves and others.

- It offers a framework for understanding the larger forces at play that create the sense of disruption many of us are experiencing.

- It highlights individual and collective practices for working creatively with disruption.

- And it focuses on what is needed to renew ourselves and our systems wisely, conserving what endures as we embrace what wasn't possible before.

Whether you want a map of the territory, prefer focusing on what you can do, thrive on the unknown, or favor some combination, this book seeks to equip you for working well with shifts and disruptions. It provides practical perspectives on the dynamics of *emergent complexity*—increasing diversity, connectivity, interdependence, and interaction in the self-organized functioning of a system. It grounds this abstract but useful idea in stories about how emergence shows up in our lives. And it offers guidance for facing the unknown.

## How My Perspective on Engaging Emergence Evolved

All change begins with disturbing the status quo. So my quest to understand emergence began, of course, with disturbance. It was 1989, and I managed software development for a cellular phone company. A major project was on the rocks. Because it touched virtually every department, lots of people had opinions about how to fix the situation. The company had hired an expert in Total Quality—a system of tools, processes, and practices that increase efficiency and effectiveness. He led a meeting attended by 30 people with a stake in the project. I was galvanized! In my 17 years of doing software projects, I had never seen so many perspectives coalesce so quickly into a clear, focused direction and plan of action. It was my first taste of what I now see as a fundamental pattern of change: interactions that disturb, differentiate, and cohere.

That meeting changed my life. I took responsibility for the Information Technology group's Total Quality effort and dove in to discover how to change the organization. We introduced new disciplines, such as process improvement, teamwork, and measurement. Over the next three years, the organization remade itself, becoming best in class by every measure. I thought I knew what I was doing. And I fell flat on my face. Disturbance, ever my ally, opened the door to deeper learning. In this case, it meant developing more compassion for myself and others.

In 1993, I took a role researching learning organizations, bringing what I discovered into U S WEST Communications—a 60,000-employee telephone company. That's when work got really interesting. I ran into these odd change processes: Appreciative Inquiry, Future Search, Bohm dialogue, and others that creatively engaged the people of a system in generating breakthroughs. In my first experience with one of these processes—Open Space Technology—I witnessed something I had thought impossible. I watched angry union technicians and company managers come together on solutions in which individuals and the organization both thrived. I was hooked.

I became part of an emerging field of practice that had no name. We practitioners began connecting with one another, sharing questions and stories via the new social technology: listservs. Vibrant worldwide communities of practice have coalesced around different change processes. Strong friendships and learning partners have been welcome byproducts.

Worn out by travel for U S WEST, I joined a forest products company as the director of quality for information technology. It provided fertile ground for experimenting with all I had learned, bringing struggles and successes along the way. After two and a half years, more equipped to face the unknown, I struck out on my own. It was daunting and exhilarating. *The Change Handbook: Group Methods for Shaping the Future* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1999), coedited with Tom Devane, was an early achievement. Containing 18 methods for engaging whole systems, the book was my attempt to understand why these odd processes worked.

Following the book, that quest to understand continues through both practice and research. With businesses, nonprofits, government agencies, and communities, I use what I now call *emergent change processes*—methods that engage the diverse people of a system in focused yet open interactions. These methods catalyze unexpected and lasting shifts in perspective and behavior. I follow scientific literature on complexity, self-organization, chaos theory, and emergence. I have

delved into spiritual practices, seeking answers to why these open-ended, nonlinear processes work. Doing so has increased my equanimity when facing disruption. As a result, I am better able to support others in engaging emergence. My own story has become more open-ended and nonlinear as my quest for uncovering the deeper patterns of these methods guides me.[1]

Because this search is not solo work, since 1993 I have been part of a loose cohort of friends I met through Open Space Technology—an emergent change process that invites people to self-organize around what they love in order to address complex, important issues. (See "About Emergent Change Processes" for a description of Open Space Technology.) Together, we have convened a number of Open Space conferences around ambitious social issues. For example, in 2003, "The Practice of Peace" brought 130 people from 26 countries, including such high-conflict areas as Northern Ireland, Nigeria, Burundi, Bosnia, and Haiti. Gatherings like this provided freedom for creative experiments that would not be likely in organizational settings. They also helped me to appreciate the communication and governance infrastructures that accelerate action in organizations once departmental boundaries are bridged.

After the shocking disturbance of a racially based shooting at a Jewish Community Center in Los Angeles in 1999, I joined with three journalists to cofound Journalism That Matters (JTM). I hoped my knowledge of emergent change processes could contribute to telling stories that served communities and democracies. This book draws many stories from JTM. The industry has been a learning lab for engaging emergence, making visible the agony and excitement in the death and rebirth of an industry.

My search for understanding the deeper patterns of emergent change processes took a step forward in 2004 when I was invited to a gathering on evolutionary emergence. Social philosopher Tom Atlee and "evolutionary evangelist" Michael Dowd (more on Michael and evolutionary evangelism in chapter 7) were planning an "Evolutionary

Salon." Scientists, spiritual leaders, and social activists were coming together to explore the implications of evolutionary emergence on human systems. Tom asked my help in hosting the meeting. With *emergence* in the title, how could I resist? Four Evolutionary Salons later, with funding from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, Tom and I developed a model of evolution centering on the role of interaction.[2] It provided a missing link in my understanding of emergence that helped connect it with my change practice.

This book, which relates emergence to the practice of change, was seeded when Steven Cady, Tom Devane, and I published the second edition of *The Change Handbook* in 2007. Because the field has exploded, we included over 60 methodologies. The book's size disturbed me. It pointed toward something more fundamental that we didn't name. It mobilized me to finally address the question of why these processes work. My answers coalesced into this book. These processes work because they help us to engage emergence compassionately, creatively, and wisely.

As I look back on these last 20 years, I see how disturbance, differentiation, and coherence have shaped my life. I share these ideas with you in the hope that together, we can take them to scale. Just think of the possibilities if more of us knew how to bring together diverse, conflicted groups that creatively coalesce and generate innovative and wise outcomes!

## ABOUT JOURNALISM THAT MATTERS

Since many Journalism That Matters (JTM) stories are in this book, here's a little background on the initiative.

Journalism That Matters generates innovations by convening, connecting, and inspiring the diverse pioneers who are shaping the emerging news and information ecology.

JTM's operating principles:

- Invite the diverse and evolving ecosystem of journalism. Include people from print, broadcast, and new media who are editors, reporters, bloggers, audience members, reformers, educators, students, and others.

- Create the space—a calm in the storm—for random encounters and conversations about what matters most.

- Work with the unknown, engaging with what's emerging in news and information in a democracy.

As of 2010, we have cohosted 14 gatherings bringing together more than a thousand people. The centerpiece of every gathering is one to two days using Open Space Technology for participants to set their own agenda.

Numerous breakthrough initiatives have been born at these gatherings. Legacy media people find hope, and new media people find fellowship and inspiration. A community of journalism pioneers is emerging, along with a growing culture of entrepreneurial journalism that serves the public good. Hope, inspiration, and excitement arise as participants catch a glimpse of a future in which they are part of the answer.

## What's in the Book?

*Engaging Emergence* turns upheaval into a promising path for change. It provides a hopeful way to think about disturbance. It gives you practices, principles, and orienting questions for stepping into chaos.

The introduction describes a fundamental pattern of change, puts emergence in context with other forms of change, speaks to why engaging emergence matters, and identifies benefits of engaging emergence.

Making sense of emergence is the focus of part 1, "The Nature of Emergence." Chapter 1, "What Is Emergence?" defines the term,

offers a history of emergence, and describes its characteristics. Because emergence isn't always sweetness and light, chapter 2, "What's the Catch?" identifies idiosyncrasies that make working with emergence challenging.

Getting to work is the focus of part 2, "Practices for Engaging Emergence." Chapter 3, "Step Up: Take Responsibility for What You Love," addresses a practice at the heart of engaging emergence. Given that emergence requires working effectively with disruption, chapter 4, "Prepare: Foster an Attitude for Engaging," covers three useful practices: embrace mystery, choose possibility, and follow life energy. Once you've prepared, chapter 5, "Host: Cultivate Conditions for Engaging," equips you to attract others by elaborating on the following practices for shaping productive, creative environments: focus intentions, welcome, and invite diversity. Chapter 6, "Step In: Practice Engaging," describes practices for interacting: inquire appreciatively, open, and reflect. Since the effects of emergence are not always immediately visible, chapter 7, "Iterate: Do It Again . . . and Again," looks at how emergence works with stability and incremental change over time. It considers the frequently asked question "How do we sustain the results?"

While the practices are useful on their own, they are part of a system for engaging emergence. Five principles—welcome disturbance, pioneer!, encourage random encounters, seek meaning, and simplify—are explored in part 3, "Principles for Engaging Emergence." These principles, each described in a chapter, came from marrying my work in emergent change processes with my study of emergence.

Part 4, "Three Questions for Engaging Emergence," introduces the last of this system. The questions map to the pattern of change mentioned earlier: disturb, differentiate, and cohere. They offer an orienting perspective for engaging emergence. Chapter 13, "How Do We Disrupt Coherence Compassionately?" speaks to why we might want to disrupt. It also clarifies the benefits of doing so compassionately.

To turn the way we usually think about creative engagement on its ear, chapter 14, "How Do We Engage Disruptions Creatively?" suggests acting from our passions. It contradicts what most of us have been taught about selfishness and service. Now that we have opened to creative engagement, chapter 15, "How Do We Renew Coherence Wisely?" reflects on what contributes to wisdom arising.

The practices, principles, and questions of parts 2 through 4 form a system for engaging emergence. The good news about systems: because they are interconnected parts, no matter where you begin, it leads to other aspects. The pieces reinforce each other, strengthening our overall understanding and capacity for engaging emergence.

With that understanding, "In Closing: What's Possible Now?" envisions what could emerge as increasing numbers of us work with emergent change.

The book ends with a "Summary of Key Ideas" and descriptions of the emergent change processes referenced in the book. Throughout the book, stories appear in a distinctive font.

As you read, consider how you might engage emergence to work with the disruptions you face. Together, we can turn upheaval into opportunities that can lead to innovative results with broad support and greater resilience in our families, neighborhoods, communities, organizations, and other social systems, such as health care, education, economics, and governance.

# FROM CHAOS
# TO COHERENCE

*Life is about not knowing, having to*
*change, taking the moment and making*
*the best of it without knowing what's*
*going to happen next.*

—Gilda Radner, *It's Always Something*

Change begins with disruption. Whether caused by something small—a broken promise—or large—a hurricane sweeping across a city—disturbance interrupts the status quo. We may find it positive: a promotion, losing weight, a new baby. We may experience it with dread: loss of a job, a contract, a life. No matter what the disruption, because it is disturbing, it can lead to change.

Disruption, disturbance, tension, upheaval, dissonance, chaos. These conditions stress us. They often challenge our ability to work together toward common goals. Some disruptions, like upheaval and chaos, are more extreme, but they all stimulate change. And though we usually relate to such situations negatively, one key shift to engaging emergence is developing a positive relationship with these sorts of

stressors. In fact, disrupting compassionately is a particularly effective approach.

Most of us avoid tension and disturbances. We attempt to plan them away, control them, or destroy them. Perhaps we hold in our anger because we don't want to cause a fuss. We feel a little more isolated as a result, but order is maintained. We learn to walk around these isolation zones, sometimes forgetting they exist. Yet they typically worsen with time. Alienation, rigidity, greed, intolerance, and inaction or violence grow. Such characteristics are present in many of our current crises.

What if tensions inspired curiosity? What if we knew how to express our anger, fear, or grief so that it contributed to something better? This introduction describes a fundamental pattern of change as a guide for working with disruption. It examines how disturbances surface useful differences that generate coherent order. It puts emergence in context with other forms of change to clarify when engaging emergence makes sense. It speaks to why engaging emergence matters. The introduction ends by naming benefits of engaging emergence.

## A Pattern of Change

How does change happen? Whether it is human, cosmological, geological, or biological, some aspects of change are predictable. By understanding them, we are better equipped to work with them. Every system contains the following:

A DRIVE FOR COHERENCE—Relationship, unity, bonding, wholeness, coalescing—a coming together—convergence. Think of atoms forming molecules, people joining communities, or our longing to contribute to something larger than ourselves.

OCCASIONAL DISRUPTIONS—Interruptions to the status quo, unexpected actions—disturbance. Think of natural disasters, angry protesters, changes in work policies or laws.

A DRIVE FOR DIFFERENTIATION—Becoming separate, individual, distinct, unique—a breaking apart—divergence. Think of teenagers separating from parents to find their identity, a co-worker striking off to freelance, or our longing to be accepted for who we are.

These forces are constantly interacting, mutually influencing each other. Nature plays out this pattern over and over. For example, a new species appears, disrupts the existing ecosystem, sorts out who survives and who goes extinct, and ultimately arrives at a new coherent state. The same dynamics play out in human systems. A case in point: writing this book has been a constant ebb and flow of disruption, differentiation, and coherence.

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The seeds of this book have been with me for years. The size of the second edition of *The Change Handbook* disturbed me. We were cataloging methodologies that were being created faster than we could document them. Something deeper was happening. Understanding that something mobilized me to write, hoping to see the different notions that surfaced. Eventually, the outline for the book you now hold coalesced. I was on a roll. I wrote to a schedule because the content was clear. Sometimes, my musings surfaced a useful distinction that found its way into the outline. The work was "steady as she goes."

The first draft was flowing out of me when I tripped. I was starting to write part 2. I had a headache. I couldn't concentrate. Forcing my way through left me exhausted, the material uninspired. Then it hit me: I faced disruption! I remembered the pattern of change. Treating my frustration with compassion, I acknowledged the disturbance and experimented with differences until something cohered. I realized there was no part 2. The book got simpler, and I got back to writing.

The resulting manuscript went to readers. I posted it on a blog. Feedback came from a variety of people, and I looked for distinctions and similarities among their responses. Themes coalesced. I planned my revisions, including

adding stories and how-to tips; made an outline; and got to work. And the chapters got longer. Too long. The manuscript asserted itself and I was stuck. Worse, my editor found the organization confusing. This time, I got the message before the headache: welcome disturbance. I experimented with different strategies. What could I delete? Would breaking the material into more chapters eliminate the confusion? Could I use different visual presentations? As options differentiated themselves, I kept tuning in to what the manuscript itself was telling me. I listened for what wanted to emerge. With great editorial coaching, a breakthrough occurred: tell a nonlinear story in a linear way. And so I have.
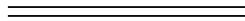
Mostly, the experience was a steady state of writing, reviewing, editing, and writing. Sometimes, distinctions led to incremental shifts—adding or removing a chapter. Occasionally, I threw up my hands when the manuscript's organization blew apart. Ultimately, it coalesced into a new, more coherent order. Steady state, incremental shifts, emergence. Understanding these different ways in which change happens equips us to work more effectively with disruption.

## Forms of Change

Though all change begins with disruption, not all change is emergent. This book focuses on emergent change because it is least understood and we need more effective ways of working with it. Knowing how emergence fits with other forms of change provides perspective on why we are experiencing more and stronger disruptions. It also helps us to understand when engaging emergence makes sense. Emergence will happen whether or not we choose to engage with it. We increase the likelihood of less destructive experiences and more desirable outcomes by working with it. I characterize change in three forms:

STEADY STATE—Disturbance is handled within the existing situation. A minor fix is made, or the disruption is ignored

or suppressed. Business as usual continues. For example, a speeder gets a ticket for driving too fast.

INCREMENTAL SHIFTS—Disruptions interrupt the status quo. We distinguish what the disturbance brings to the system and integrate changes. For example, a constitution is amended.

EMERGENCE—Occasional upheaval results when principles that keep a system orderly break down. Chaos sparks experiments. Current assumptions are clarified, and new possibilities surface. Ultimately, something dies and a new coherence arises that contains aspects of the old and the new but isn't either. For example, a revolution leads to a new form of governance.

Much of today's angst comes from treating all disruptions as if they fit a steady state scenario or, at worst, could be managed through incremental shifts. Economic upheaval, failing schools, increasing terrorism—all indicate larger forces in play.

## The Consequences of Not Engaging Emergence

Most of our current strategies for handling disruptions work well to maintain a stable system or to manage incremental shifts. They are great for moving from where we are to a predetermined outcome. When the root causes of disturbance are more complex, often more emotionally charged, approaching them as if we were fixing a broken car can make the situation worse.

We maintain our sense of coherence by drawing boundaries, physical or psychological. We protect those inside our neighborhoods or organizations and keep "the other"—people we view as different from us—out. Fenced communities and security systems are growing around the world. Airplane travel and immigration are vastly more difficult because of the security we use to keep us safe.

Such methods are natural responses when our way of life seems threatened. They also isolate us. If someone holds a different view, we

better not let him or her in. Bill Bishop's *The Big Sort* chronicles how people in the United States have sorted themselves into homogeneous communities over the past three decades. We choose neighborhoods, churches, and news shows most compatible with our beliefs.[1]

Even if we doubt our "tribe's" stand on an issue, many of us don't voice it for fear of being ostracized. We hold it in and feel more alone as a result. The outcome: we isolate ourselves based on differences and retreat into a posture of defensive rigidity. In contrast, engaging emergence uses our differences to bring us together, opening us to creative involvement.

So, increasing numbers of us face complex challenges and don't know how to solve them. Some of us feel stuck or overwhelmed by the accelerating urgency of the conflicts and challenges facing our organizations, communities, families, or even ourselves. Some of us have too many choices and neither the time nor the expertise to discern among them. Others of us see no choices at all. Familiar strategies lead to dead ends, leaving many seeking alternatives. Until we engage emergence, disruptions will continue erupting more and more destructively.

Consider an industry in upheaval: newspapers. Readership has been falling for decades. Even as newspaper executives acknowledge the radical shifts they need to make, they continue approaching change using the same old strategies. A 2008 article in *Editor and Publisher*, a time-honored industry journal, makes visible the tragic irony: while we may know we need to change, we don't always know how to do it.

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"Turn and Face the Change—With Newspaper Industry in Crisis, 'Everything's on the Table,'" exhorted the article.[2] It ends, "If this is a seminal crisis, then we have to do some seminal thinking. And it really does have to be radical."

Yet the most innovative idea in the article was distinctly small bore: print less frequently. When the world economy faltered in 2009, the decline

turned conundrum into catastrophe. About 15,000 newspaper people lost their jobs.[3] More than 100 papers closed their doors, including the 150-year-old *Rocky Mountain News*.[4] The decline was predictable, yet virtually every newspaper is choosing extinction over experimentation. In perhaps the ultimate irony, *Editor and Publisher* closed its doors in December 2009.

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Newspaper executives are not alone in struggling with how to approach change. In *Change or Die: The Three Keys to Change at Work and in Life*, Alan Deutschman quotes experts saying that the root cause of the health crisis hasn't changed for decades.[5] Yet the medical establishment can't figure out what to do about it. Individuals also resist change when facing disruption. Deutschman cites research into change-or-die scenarios for patients facing bypass surgery and other diseases that can be mitigated by lifestyle changes. Even when we know we must change, 90 percent of us won't alter our behavior to fit the new situation. We choose death over adaptation.[6]

## The Other 10 Percent

In the spirit of turning upheaval into opportunity, what goes on in that 10 percent of cases where we choose adaptation? According to the researchers in Deutschman's book, people find fellowship that inspires, reframe disaster as possibility, and keep practicing. Rather than making incremental shifts, changing a habit here and there, they engage emergence. They redefine the fundamental assumptions that guide their image of themselves and their actions. And they don't do it alone.

In no particular order, the following table compares traditional thinking about change with ideas that support emergence. This list grew out of my work with emergent change processes. Understanding the differences can help us to make more informed choices about how we approach change.

| Traditional Ideas about Change | Emerging Ideas about Change |
|---|---|
| Difference and dissonance as problems. | Diversity and dissonance as resources, with problems inviting exploration. |
| Restrain, resist disturbance. | Welcome and use disturbance in a creative dance with order. |
| Focus on the predictable, controllable. | Focus on the mysterious from a foundation of what we understand. |
| Ensure that there are no surprises. | Experiment; learn from surprises. |
| Focus on outcomes. | Focus on intentions; hold outcomes lightly. |
| Focus on the form and its stability. | Focus on intended function; work with forms as they arise and dissipate. |
| Hierarchy. | Networks containing natural, often fluid hierarchies. |
| Visionary leadership. | Shared, emergent, flexible leadership. |
| Top-down or bottom-up. | Multidirectional. |
| Work solo. | Work in community and solo, bringing our unique gifts. |
| Pay attention to the mainstream. | Pay attention to the dance between the mainstream and the margins. |
| Build/construct/manage. | Invite/open/support. |
| Follow the plan. | Follow the energy, using the plan as useful information. |
| Manufacture. | Midwife the birth of novelty and cultivate its development. |
| Assemble the parts. | Interactions among the parts form a novel whole. |
| Design processes. | Design processes and cultivate nutrient environments. |
| Handle logistics. | Cultivate welcoming conditions, including handling logistics. |
| Strive for sustainability. | Sustainability exists in a dance of dynamic tensions. |
| Incremental shifts. | Periodic leaps and incremental shifts. |
| Classical. | Classical skills that also support jazz and improvisation. |
| Declare/advocate. | Inquire/explore, using what is at the heart of our advocacy as a resource. |

Changing Notions of Change

The next time you face disruption and don't know how to approach it, look at the left side of the table. If it reminds you of what you would ordinarily do, look at the right-hand counterpart. Perhaps you will find some new insights for handling your situation. If taking the approach on the right seems like a lot of effort, consider the reasons for doing so.

## Why Does Engaging Emergence Matter?

Emergence—increasingly complex order self-organizing out of disorder—isn't just a metaphor for what we are experiencing. Complexity increases as more diversity, connectivity, interdependence, or interactions become part of a system. The disruptive shifts occurring in our current systems are signs that these characteristics are on the rise.

Today's unprecedented conditions could lead to chaos and collapse, but they also contain the seeds of renewal. We can choose to coalesce into a vibrant, inclusive society through creative interactions among diverse people facing seemingly intractable challenges. In many ways, this path is counterintuitive. It breaks with traditional thinking about change, including the ideas that it occurs top-down and that it follows an orderly plan, one step at a time.

We don't control emergence. Nor can we fully predict how it arises. It can be violent, overwhelming. Yet we can engage it confident that unexpected and valuable breakthroughs can occur. Working with emergence involves some unfamiliar notions:

EMBRACING MYSTERY—Asking questions in addition to stating answers.

FOLLOWING LIFE ENERGY—Using our intuition in addition to making plans.

CHOOSING POSSIBILITY—Attending to our dreams and aspirations, not just our goals and objectives.

Change is always happening. When it is emergent change, it seriously disrupts what's familiar. It behooves us to learn how to work with it creatively. Our survival in an increasingly unpredictable world is at stake. When change is treated as an opportunity, prospects for positive outcomes are all around us.

Emergent change processes have uncovered creative and productive ways to engage emergence. These methods have also surfaced some dependable outcomes from doing so.

## Benefits of Engaging Emergence

Just because specific outcomes from emergence are unpredictable doesn't make working with emergence impossible. We benefit from engaging emergence in these ways:

INDIVIDUALLY, WE ARE STRETCHED AND REFRESHED—We feel more courageous and inspired to pursue what matters to us. With a myriad of new ideas, and confident of mentors, supporters, and fans, we act.

At an early Journalism That Matters gathering, a young woman, recently out of college, arrived with the seed of an idea: putting a human face on international reporting for U.S. audiences. At the meeting, she found support for the idea. Deeply experienced people coached her and gave her entrée to their contacts. Today, the Common Language Project is thriving, with multiple awards (www .clpmag.org).

NEW AND UNLIKELY PARTNERSHIPS FORM—When we connect with people whom we don't normally meet, sparks may fly. Creative conditions make room for our differences, fostering lively and productive interactions.

A reluctant veteran investigative reporter was teamed with a young digital journalist. They created a multimedia Web site for a story

from a two-year investigation. Not only did the community embrace the story, but the veteran is pursuing more interactive projects. And the digital journalist is learning how to do investigative reporting.

BREAKTHROUGH PROJECTS SURFACE—Experiments are inspired by interactions among diverse people.

The Poynter Institute, an educational institution serving mainstream media, was seeking new directions because its traditional constituency was shrinking. As a cohost for a JTM gathering, Poynter had a number of staff participating. They listened broadly and deeply to the diverse people present. An idea emerged that builds on who they are and takes them into new territory: supporting the training needs of entrepreneurial journalists.

COMMUNITY IS STRENGTHENED—We discover kindred spirits among a diverse mix of strangers. Lasting connections form, and a sense of kinship grows. We realize that we share an intention—a purpose or calling guided by some deeper source of wisdom. Knowing that our work serves not just ourselves but a larger whole increases our confidence to act.

As a community blogger who attended a JTM conference put it, "I'm no longer alone. I've discovered people asking similar questions, aspiring to a similar future for journalism. Now I have friends I can bounce ideas off of, knowing we share a common cause."

THE CULTURE BEGINS TO CHANGE—With time and continued interaction, a new narrative of who we are takes shape.

When Journalism That Matters began, we hoped to discover new possibilities for a struggling field so that it could better serve democracy. As mainstream media, particularly newspapers, began failing, the work became more vital. We see an old story of journalism dying and provide a place for it to be mourned. We also see the glimmers of a new and vital story being born. In it, journalism

is a conversation rather than a lecture. Stories inspire rather than discourage their audience. Journalism That Matters has become a vibrant and open conversational space where innovations emerge. New language, such as news ecology—the information exchange among the public, government, and institutions that can inform, inspire, engage, and activate—makes it easier to understand what's changing. People say, "I didn't know I could be effective without a big organization behind me. Now I do."

These experiences show that working with emergence can create great initiatives, the energy to act, a sense of community, and a greater sense of the whole—a collectively intelligent system at work.

As more people engage emergence, something fundamental changes about who we are, what we are doing, how we are with each other, and perhaps what it all means. In the process, we tear apart familiar and comfortable notions about how change works. We bring together unlikely bedfellows. For example, when Journalism That Matters hosted 44 mainstream journalists and media reformers in 2007, I watched them eye each other suspiciously as the gathering began. Once they realized that everyone cared about the role of journalism in a democracy, cooperation flourished.

The old story of change and how to do it, generally called *change management*, like many stories of our times no longer functions well. A new story is arising that works creatively with complexity, conflict, and upheaval. That story involves understanding more about emergence and what it can teach us about turning upheaval into opportunity. Later, we'll discuss practices, principles, questions, and what is possible as more and more of us engage emergence.

The theory and practice of change is too important to leave solely in the hands of experts. It is time to broadly develop the capacity to reenvision our organizations, our communities, and the systems where we live and work—health care, education, politics, economics, and more. Together, we can make it happen.

# The Nature of Emergence

*The only thing that makes life possible is permanent,*
*intolerable uncertainty: not knowing what comes next.*

—Ursula K. LeGuin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*

Emergence is nature's way of changing. We see it all the time in its cousin, emergencies. What happens?

A disturbance interrupts ordinary life. In spite of natural responses, such as grief or fear or anger, people differentiate—take on different tasks. For example, in an earthquake, while many are immobilized, some care for the injured. Others look for food or water. A few care for the animals. Someone creates a "find your loved ones" site on the Internet. A handful blaze the trails and others follow. They see what's needed and bring their unique gifts to the situation. A new order begins to arise.

The pattern of change described in the introduction presented these aspects of emergent change:

- *Disruption* breaks apart the status quo.
- The system *differentiates*, surfacing innovations and distinctions among its parts.
- As different parts interact, a new, more complex *coherence* arises.

People often speak of a magical quality to emergence, in part because we can't predetermine specific outcomes. Emergence can't be manufactured. It often arises from individual and collective intuition—instinctive and unconscious knowing or sensing without depending on the rational mind. It is often fueled by strong emotions—excitement, longing, anger, fear, grief. And it rarely follows a logical, orderly path. It feels much more like a leap of faith.

Emergence is always happening. If we don't work with it, it will work us over. In human systems, it will likely show itself when strong emotions are ignored or suppressed for too long. Although emergence is natural, it isn't always positive, and it has a dark side. Erupting volcanoes, crashing meteorites, and wars have brought emergent change. For example, new species or cultures fill the void left by those made extinct. Even wars can leave exciting offspring of novel, higher-order

Disruption

Differentiation

Coherence

Disrupt—Differentiate—Cohere[1]

systems. The League of Nations and United Nations were unprecedented social innovations from their respective world wars.

Emergence seems disorderly because we can't discern meaningful patterns, just unpredictable interactions that make no sense. But order is accessible when diverse people facing intractable challenges uncover and implement ideas that none could have predicted or accomplished on their own. Emergence can't be forced—but it can be fostered.

The chapters in part 1 speak to what emergence is, how it works, and some catches to be aware of when engaging it. Making sense of a situation is tough when you're in the midst of the storm. Through understanding the nature of emergence, we can more effectively handle whatever changes and challenges come our way.

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## *Engaging Emergence:*
## *Turning Upheaval into Opportunity*

by Peggy Holman
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