



# a simpler way

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*from the author of Leadership and the New Science*

An Excerpt From

***A Simpler Way***

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# an invitation

We want life to be less arduous and more delightful.

We want to be able to think differently about how to organize human activities.

This book springs from these desires. It explores a different way of thinking about life and about how organizing activities might occur. It is grounded in our beliefs, our experiences, and our hopes. It represents our present understandings and our most intriguing questions. It is an expression of what we have learned and what we hope to discover.

The mechanistic image of the world is a very deep image, planted at subterranean depths in most of us. But it doesn't help us any longer. Our own search for new ways of understanding has led us to philosophers, scientists, poets, novelists, spiritual teachers, colleagues, audiences, and each other. We keep exploring what we can see when we look at life and organizations using different images.

The primary question of this book is: How could we organize human endeavor if we developed different understandings of how life organizes itself?

As authors, we ask this question for all of us, for there is no one who lives life unaffected by the organizations we have created. And we invite each of you into the inquiry. We hope we have succeeded in creating a work that evokes your own experience and connection with the concepts we describe. We want the design and arrangement of this book to invite you into new ways of seeing. We all need one other to explore these ideas. Each of us contributes our experiences and thinking to one another as we try to understand the world differently. We are essential to each other's inquiry. We welcome you.

As we have played with new ideas and a new worldview, we keep attending to our beliefs. So much of human behavior is habitual. And behind every habit is a belief – about people, life, the world. We work from the premise that if we can know our beliefs, we can then act with greater consciousness about our behaviors. Examining beliefs has become a compelling process for us (and probably has made us annoying to more people than we care to account for).

Here are our present beliefs about human organizations and the world in which they come into form.

The universe is a living, creative, experimenting experience of discovering what's possible at all levels of scale, from microbe to cosmos.

Life's natural tendency is to organize. Life organizes into greater levels of complexity to support more diversity and greater sustainability.

Life organizes around a self. Organizing is always an act of creating an identity.

Life self-organizes. Networks, patterns, and structures emerge without external imposition or direction. Organization wants to happen.

People are intelligent, creative, adaptive, self-organizing, and meaning-seeking.

Organizations are living systems. They too are intelligent, creative, adaptive, self-organizing, meaning-seeking.

These beliefs are ours. They have emerged from the kinds of information and perspectives that are included in this book. You may develop different beliefs as you read. We encourage you to question yourself at the level of your beliefs. Such personal questioning requires us to go very deeply into our ideas about the world. It often causes us to challenge more than we want to have challenged. But we have found that belief is the place from which true change originates. Belief is why we have written this book.

# a simpler way

There is a simpler way to organize human endeavor. It requires a new way of being in the world. It requires being in the world without fear. Being in the world with play and creativity. Seeking after what's possible. Being willing to learn and to be surprised.

This simpler way to organize human endeavor requires a belief that the world is inherently orderly. The world seeks organization. It does not need us humans to organize it.

This simpler way summons forth what is best about us. It asks us to understand human nature differently, more optimistically. It identifies us as creative. It acknowledges that we seek after meaning. It asks us to be less serious, yet more purposeful, about our work and our lives. It does not separate play from the nature of being.

This world of a simpler way is a world we already know. We may not have seen it clearly, but we have been living in it all our lives. It is a world that is more welcoming, more hospitable to our humanness. Who we are and what is best about us can more easily flourish.

The world we had been taught to see was alien to our humanness. We were taught to see the world as a great machine. But then we could find nothing human in it. Our thinking grew even stranger—we turned this world-image back on ourselves and believed that we too were machines.

Because we could not find ourselves in the machine world we had created in thought, we experienced the world as foreign and fearsome. Alienation spawned the need to dominate. Fear led to control. We wanted to harness and control everything. We tried, but it did not stop the fear. Mistakes threatened us; failed plans ruined us; relentless mechanistic forces demanded absolute submission. There was little room for human concerns.

But the world is not a machine. It is alive, filled with life and the history of life. Whatever ancient rocks we discover, notes biologist James Lovelock, we also discover ancient life preserved in them. Life cannot be eradicated from the world, even though our metaphors have tried.

As we change our images of the world, as we leave behind the machine, we welcome ourselves back. We recover a world that is supportive of human endeavor.

This world of a simpler way has a natural and spontaneous tendency toward organization. It seeks order. Whatever chaos is present at the start, when elements combine, systems of organization appear. Life is attracted to order – order gained through wandering explorations into new relationships and new possibilities.



In this world, we can move with more assurance. The world supports our efforts more than we could have hoped. We can create, experiment, organize, fail, accomplish, play, learn, create again.

It is life's invitation to freedom, creativity, and meaning that welcomes us back. These are the desires of human existence. Now we can see our reflection in the world. It is we humans, says physicist Ilya Prigogine, who are "the most striking realization of the basic laws of nature."

If we can be in the world in the fullness of our humanity, what are we capable of? If we are free to play, to experiment and discover, if we are free to fail, what might we create? What could we accomplish if we stopped trying to structure the world into existence? What could we accomplish if we worked with life's natural tendency to organize? Who could we be if we found a simpler way?

# poetics

*A. R. Ammons*

I look for the way  
things will turn  
out spiralling from a center,  
the shape  
things will take to come forth in

so that the birch tree white  
touched black at branches  
will stand out  
wind-glittering  
totally its apparent self:

I look for the forms  
things want to come as  
from what black wells of possibility,  
how a thing will  
unfold:

not the shape on paper – though  
that, too – but the  
uninterfering means on paper:

not so much looking for the shape  
as being available  
to any shape that may be  
summoning itself  
through me  
from the self not mine but ours.

# play

I look for the way  
things will turn  
out spiralling from a center

Life is creative. It plays itself into existence, seeking out new relationships, new capacities, new traits. Life is an experiment to discover what's possible. As it tinkers with discovery, it creates more and more possibilities. With so much freedom for discovery, how can life be anything but playful?

What has kept us from seeing life as creative, even playful? At least since Darwin, Western culture has harbored some great errors. We have believed that the world is hostile, that we are in a constant struggle for survival, that the consequence of error is death, that the environment seeks our destruction. In such a world, there is no safety. Who wouldn't be afraid?

Darwinistic thought solidified the belief that life was not supposed to happen. Life was an accident, just one of many random events. Because the world had never intended for life to appear, the world had no obligation to sustain it. Life had to fight for every breath, tested constantly by an unwelcoming and unforgiving environment. Species appeared by chance. Individuals that stumbled on lucky genetic errors survived. The environment loomed over every living thing, ready to challenge, ready to destroy. It was an awesome responsibility life faced: Get it right, or die.

These errors of thought have guided most of our decisions. They have kept us from seeing a world which is continuously exploring and creating. Life is about invention, not survival. We are here to create, not to defend. Out beyond the shadows of Darwinistic thought, a wholly different world appears. A world that delights in its explorations. A world that makes it up as it goes along. A world that welcomes us into the exploration as good partners.

Images of life as creative and playful have been with us for thousands of years in many spiritual traditions, but modern Western thought makes it difficult to approach life as play. As writers inviting you to think about what human life could be if we all saw the world as playful and creative, we have chosen to weave one poem through our work. This is not just because we love poetry but also because, in a creative and playful world, all of us are, all the time, poets.

All of us are always engaged in trying to convey our experience of life in images that can connect it with other experiences. Even the most analytic science, the most careful construction of models, is always poetry, the creation of images that evoke experience, linking things together for new ways of comprehending. We cannot know the world in an objective way. We can never get outside our senses to determine if reality exists in some sphere beyond us. We can never gain a true picture of how it really is. We can never observe what's "right."

We peer out through our senses, describing our experience of what we think reality to be. We choose images to convey our experience. We create metaphors to connect what we see. We explore new ways of understanding what seems to be happening and what we think it means.

Ezra Pound called poetry "the language of exploration." The place to begin our exploration of a creative, playful world is with the acknowledgment that we are all poets, exploring possibilities of meaning in a world which is also all the time exploring possibilities.

"I believe I experience creativity at every moment of my life," said French philosopher Henri Bergson. Can our own lives be such joyous experiences? Perhaps we can move into this experience by understanding how life creates itself. Life's process of creating is quite different from what we had thought. There are enough underlying principles to this process that we could call it a logic, a logic of play. In fact, we would like to call it the logic of life. The key elements of this logic are evident in recent work by scientists that explore how life comes into being.

**Everything is in a constant process of discovery and creating.** Everything is changing all the time: individuals, systems, environments, the rules, the processes of evolution. Even change changes. Every organism reinterprets the rules, creates exceptions for itself, creates new rules.

**Life uses messes to get to well-ordered solutions.** Life doesn't seem to share our desires for efficiency or neatness. It uses redundancy, fuzziness, dense webs of relationships, and unending trials and errors to find what works.

**Life is intent on finding what works, not what's "right."** It is the ability to keep finding solutions that is important; any one solution is temporary. There are no permanently right answers. The capacity to keep changing, to find what works now, is what keeps any organism alive.

**Life creates more possibilities as it engages with opportunities.** There are no "windows of opportunity," narrow openings in the fabric of space-time that soon disappear forever. Possibilities beget more possibilities; they are infinite.

**Life is attracted to order.** It experiments until it discovers how to form a system that can support diverse members. Individuals search out a wide range of possible relationships to discover whether they can organize into a life-sustaining system. These explorations continue until a system is discovered. This system then provides stability for its members, so that individuals are less buffeted by change.

**Life organizes around identity.** Every living thing acts to develop and preserve itself. Identity is the filter that every organism or system uses to make sense of the world. New information, new relationships, changing environments – all are interpreted through a sense of self. This tendency toward self-creation is so strong that it creates a seeming paradox. An organism will change to maintain its identity.

**Everything participates in the creation and evolution of its neighbors.** There are no unaffected outsiders. No one system dictates conditions to another. All participate together in creating the conditions of their interdependence.

Life is creative. It makes it up as it goes along, changing the rules even. This behavior flies in the face of the logic we inherited about how the world works. Most of us grew up in a world where we believed things existed in a fixed and independent state. Things could be understood by analysis. Laws and principles could be extracted from observations of their behavior. Predictions could be made for similar situations. Right answers would be hard won by bright minds. Safety would be earned by assiduous analysis.

We have focused for a long time on trying to discover what's right. We have taken things apart, sifting through our analysis for the right answer, creating more and more debris, surrounded by numbers that overwhelm us with dissatisfactions.

These activities are cloaked in terror. What if we don't find it? What if we get it wrong? What if someone else finds it before we do? Extinction will follow swiftly on the heels of any mistake. This fear of error seems the darkest of Darwinian shadows. When errors hold so much peril, play disappears. Creativity ceases. Only fear and struggle persist. Paradoxically, we make greater errors.

We say to one another, "Get it right the first time." How can we live with so much fear?



There is no such thing as survival of the fittest, only survival of the fit. This means that there is no one answer that is right, but many answers that might work. Life explores all sorts of combinations, content to find anything that works.

The puzzle in biology is not how natural selection forces an organism into one right solution. The puzzle is how so much diversity, such rampant profligacy, can be tamed sufficiently to develop organisms that are similar enough to reproduce. Why are there so many different plants and animals? Perhaps it is because life has only these simple criteria: Whatever you become, make sure you can survive and reproduce. These are very broad constraints, not strict rules. Given so much freedom, organisms take off in all directions, exploring what's possible.

Nature encourages wild self-expression as long as it doesn't threaten the survival of the organism. The world supports incredible levels of diversity, playful additions to one's physical appearance, unique excursions into color and flair. There is no ideal design for anything, just interesting combinations that arise as a living thing explores its space of possibilities.

Yet we have terrorized ourselves as a species by the thought of evolution, driving ourselves into positions of paralyzing conformity for fear of getting things wrong.

This world of wild exploration is one which tinkers itself into existence. A French biologist describes the process of creating living things as *bricolage* – assembling parts and items in complicated arrangements, not because they fit some ideal design, but just because they are possible.

Tinkerers have skills but no clear plans. They make do with the materials at hand. Does such tinkering make life appear indifferent, relativistic, crassly opportunistic? Or does it reveal life's delight in exploration, in discovering what's possible? Tinkering opens us to what's possible in the moment. Analytic plans drive us only toward what we think we already know.

But life's tinkering has direction. It tinkers toward order – toward systems that are more complex and more effective. The process used is exploratory and messy, but the movement is toward order. In human attempts to construct functioning ecosystems, scientists cannot predict what will work. But they do know that the system will seek stability. Almost always, what begins in randomness ends in stability. Life seeks solutions, tends toward support and stability, generates systems that sustain diverse individuals. Life is attracted to order.

But how it gets there violates all of our rules of good process: Life is not neat, parsimonious, logical, nor elegant. Life seeks order in a disorderly way. Life uses processes we find hard to tolerate and hard to believe in – mess upon mess until something workable emerges. In trying to recreate self-sustaining ecosystems, biologist Stuart Pimm says: "But keep on adding species, keep on letting them fall apart and, surprisingly, they eventually reach a mix that will not fall apart. ...It takes a lot of repeated messes to get it right."

All this messy playfulness creates relationships that make available more: more expressions, more variety, more stability, more support. In our exploration of what's possible, we are led to search for new and different partners. Who we become together will always be different than who we were alone. Our range of creative expression increases as we join with others. New relationships create new capacities.

This creative world is playful even in its processes. None of us struggles to create ourselves in isolation, fighting to survive in a world of fixed rules and unyielding circumstances. Every change we make in ourselves, every exploratory path we follow, changes many others. Our explorations even change the rules by which we change. We are not contestants pitted against one another in a game with all the rules set ahead of time. The world is more playful than this, more relational. Life invites us to create not only the forms but even the processes of discovery.

The environment is invented by our presence in it. We do not parachute into a sea of turbulence, to sink or swim. We and our environments become one system, each influencing the other, each co-determining the other. Geneticist R. C. Lewontin explains that environments are best thought of as sets of relationships organized by living beings. "Organisms do not experience environments. They create them."

This codetermination is evident in the evolution of our planet. In its nearly four billion years of experimentation, life has created Earth as a set of relationships that are hospitable to life. It has discovered both new forms and new processes. Science writer Louise B. Young describes this process beautifully:

Life altered the atmosphere and gentled the sunlight. It turned the naked rocks of the continents into friable soil and clothed them with a richly variegated mantle of green which captured the energy of our own star for the use of living things on earth, and it softened the force of the winds. In the seas life built great reefs that broke the impact of storm-driven waves. It sifted and piled up shining beaches along the shores. Working with amazing strength and endurance life transformed an ugly and barren landscape into a benign and beautiful place.

In a universe where the desire to experiment and to create is so inescapable, it seems important to ask why. Why are novelty and experimentation so encouraged? Why does life seek to organize with other life?

When living beings link together, they form systems that create more possibilities, more freedom for individuals.

This is why life organizes, why life seeks systems – so that more may flourish.

# organizing as play

Life is creative. It explores itself through play, intent on discovering what's possible. Can we bring this creative play of the world into our lives in organizations?

Life often feels like a series of tests presented to us by hostile teachers. But this isn't true. Life isn't concealing solutions to problems; we're not being tested to see if we get the right answer. Instead, life is exploring to see what works, to experience the pleasure of the unexpected and the unique.

When did opportunities begin to feel so limited? How did we come to believe in "windows of opportunity," rare openings that suddenly snap shut? When did we become so unforgiving and so punishing of one another's explorations? Experimentation doesn't use up possibilities; it creates more. More information, more experiences, more insights. We have limited the world, but it remains wide open to us.

Many of us have created lives and organizations that give very little support for experimentation. We believe that answers already exist out there, independent of us. We don't need to experiment to find what works; we just need to find the answer. So we look to other organizations, or to experts, or to reports. We are dedicated detectives, tracking down solutions, attempting to pin them on ourselves and our organizations.

Could we stop these searches? What if we gave up so much striving to discover what others were doing? What if we invested more time and attention in our own experimentation? We could focus our efforts on discovering solutions that worked uniquely for us. We could realize that solutions that are not perfect – only pretty good – can work for us. We could focus on what's viable, rather than what's right.

Observing others' successes can show us new possibilities, expand our thinking, trigger our creativity. But their experience can never provide models that will work the same for us. It is good to be inquisitive; it is hopeless to believe that they have discovered our answers.

We could give more support to our own experimentation if we focused on discovering pretty good solutions that worked for now. With more to choose from, with none bidding for support as the ultimate right answer, we might feel less attached to them. If these solutions did not require such enormous investments of resources, egos, and certainties, we could abandon them sooner when they stopped working. People could feel freer to respond creatively to the flow of events and demands, rather than feel locked in loyalty to some world-class but failing solution. Agility and the freedom to be creative are more likely when we focus on what works rather than what's right.

Discovering what works in the particular universe of any organization is the task of everyone in that organization. Most people want to dedicate their intelligence to discovering solutions that help their system work better. Life is attracted to order. People are attracted to figuring out how to make something happen. We want to be engaged in the creation of unique, daring, colorful, and surprising adaptations. We want to create for the good of our enterprises.

Playful and creative enterprises are messy and redundant. Human thinking is accomplished by processes that are messy and redundant. When computer scientists first tried to mimic the lavish parallelism found in human thinking and all of nature, they had to link together more than 64,000 computers working on the same problem at the same time. Parallel systems are dedicated to finding what works, not by careful stepwise analysis in the hands of a few experts, but by large numbers of a population messing about in the task of solution-creation. They come up with better solutions, but they are based on a different kind of logic: trying thousands of things simultaneously to find what works.

Science writer Kevin Kelly describes these systems as a “messy cascade of inter-dependent events....What emerges from the collective is not a series of critical individual actions but a multitude of simultaneous actions whose collective pattern is far more important.”

Parallel systems are not afraid of error. Errors are expected, explored, welcomed. More errors create more information that results in a greater capacity to solve problems. Any one error counts for less because, while there are more of them, they are not linked together. This is not the case in the more familiar serial system, where activities build on one another in lockstep sequences and our work depends entirely on what others have done. In a serial system, one small error has the potential to crash the whole system. In the summer of 1990, America’s long-distance phone service experienced frequent failures. It had taken two million lines of code to run this serial system. It took only three lines of code to bring it down.



Simultaneity reduces the impact of any one error. More errors matter less if the actors are not linked together sequentially. The space for experimentation increases as we involve more minds in the experiment, as long as they can operate independently. What links people together is their focus on a needed solution. But in discovering what works, they are not waiting for one another to act.

The simultaneity of parallel processing may look like wasteful redundancy. Yet our fears about redundancy developed from the belief that organizations work best when they mimic machine efficiencies. What is efficient for a machine – simple, stepwise operations, maximum outputs from minimum inputs, nonrepetitive parts and processes – has little correlation to the way the world explores itself. Bacterial colonies successfully locate food by sending out “random walkers.” Each walker is a cluster of a thousand bacteria. Exorbitant numbers of these walkers – about ten thousand per colony – go off simultaneously, searching in all directions. Billions of years ago, bacteria discovered the real efficiency of random and redundant behaviors.

Life behaves in messy ways. It succeeds in creating, responding, and adapting by using processes that have no connection to our machine-led ways of thinking. In a living system, what is redundant? How can anyone know? Life doesn’t pursue parsimony.

Fuzzy, messy, continuously exploring systems bent on discovering what works are far more practical and successful than our attempts at efficiency. Such systems are not trying to reduce inputs in order to maximize outputs. They slosh around in the mess, involve many individuals, encourage discoveries, and move quickly past mistakes. They are learning all the time, engaging everyone in finding what works. The system succeeds because it involves many tinkerers focused on figuring out what's possible.

Could we begin to appreciate that this kind of tinkering is efficient? Tinkerers make do with what is available, most often acting with fewer resources than desired. In this sense, they are extremely efficient. They experiment with what is at hand until they discover a workable solution. The solution is discovered through the doing, by noticing "the shape things will take to come forth in."

Playful tinkering requires consciousness. If we are not mindful, if our attention slips, then we can't notice what's available or discover what's possible. Staying present is the discipline of play. Great focus and concentration are required. We need to stay aware of everything that's happening as it is happening, and to respond with minimal hesitation.

Playful enterprises are alert. They are open to information, always seeking more, yearning for surprises.

The more present and aware we are as individuals and as organizations, the more choices we create. As awareness increases, we can engage with more possibilities. We are no longer held prisoner by habits, unexamined thoughts, or information we refuse to look at.

Yet we often tend to limit our explorations of what's possible by surrounding ourselves with large amounts of information that tell us nothing new. We collect information from measures that tell us how we are doing – whether we're up to standard, whether we're meeting our goals. But these measures lock us into learning only about a predetermined world. They keep us distracted from questioning our experience in a way that could create greater possibilities. They don't ask us to question why we're doing what we're doing. They don't ask us to notice what learning is available from all those things we decided not to measure.

There is an important humility associated with trying to direct our activities by setting goals or measures. Every act of observation loses more information than it gains. Whatever we decide to notice blinds us to other possibilities. In directing our attention to certain things, we lose awareness of everything else. We collapse the world of possibilities into a narrow band of observation.

In a creative organization, everyone in the organization feels compelled to be alert, seeking out new measures, new events to observe. Everyone questions whether there is more to notice. As we measure our measures, we create the conditions for much greater creativity. Our consciousness expands as we become willing to question even our processes of observation. Consciousness and creativity are inextricably linked in this always discovering world.

Living in this discovery-focused, messy, parallel-processing world can't help but engage us with the world's choice for diversity. Parallel processes require both diversity and freedom. There is more than one workable solution, and these solutions arise from many different forms of self-expression. Everyone tinkers in a unique way. No one is limited to a particular method. Everyone is free to use his or her own best thinking to discover what works.

Life is not driving us toward one solution. The world is interested in pluralism. Only in this way can it discover more about itself. As we explore our organizations' opportunities, life is calling us to experiment and change. We might discover some bold, as-yet-undreamed-of solution, some unique quirk of design or expression. When we do, we can feel pleased. But not for long. The world moves on. The world does not stay attached to a particular way of being or to a particular invention. It seeks diversity. It wants to move on to more inventing, to more possibilities. The world's desire for diversity compels us to change.

this material has been excerpted from

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