Essential Explorations:

Gaining clarity of identity in context to re-imagine the future

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May 8, 2014

UPDATED VERSION

07/22/2014

Introduction: Personal Explorations

It is my opinion that practitioners need to experience their own theory and methods in order to better understand all angles of their own practice, particularly the perspectives of client and practitioner. No one can really know what another person's experience is, yet I think it is important to try to put ourselves in their shoes. Additionally, in the interest of minimizing hypocrisy and "do as I say, not as I do" (in reality or as perceived by the client), the practitioner needs to practice what they preach as much as possible—with compassionate forgiveness for ourselves and others because we are all human and imperfect, of course.

Interestingly, my explorations of self have not often been intentionally practiced for the purposes of understanding the experience of others. On the other hand, it seems entirely appropriate to be absorbed in self-exploration before expanding that exploration to include perceptions of others. In fact, in my informal and formal recommendations to others, self-exploration is the starting point for moving forward with just about anything. Thus, my seemingly unproductive interest in self exploration is leading me through the phases of my theory of practice, step by step. How fortuitous!

The self-exploration rabbit-hole (Carroll, 1865) has been instrumental in helping me to re-integrate pieces of myself that often seem at odds with each other: the rational and emotional, the physical and spiritual, the individual and communal, and probably others that I have not identified yet. I found myself in a strange world, reading articles in philosophy of theology journals and related sources, absorbed intellectually and emotionally in a new realm of connectivity and differentiated discussion with people I have never met. And yes, I really do talk to the papers I am reading as if the author can hear me.

The initial trigger for spiritual exploration was a website I stumbled upon when I was searching for descriptions of archaeology and naturalism to see if they fit well as symbols of my Authentic Presence. It was the website of the Spiritual Naturalist Society, giving a definition of Spiritual Naturalism. Keywords that jumped out at me: "compassion," "relief from suffering," "rationality," "essential," "essence of life," etc (http://spiritualnaturalistsociety.org/about-us/what-is-spiritual-naturalism). I have struggled for quite some time to integrate and explain why I believe all life is sacred, biological and related sciences are my source of "knowing," (with consideration for the limitations of science and human understanding), I do not need God/gods to have and practice morality, and so on. When reading their definition of spiritual naturalism, I suddenly felt part of something bigger and much less alone, which, interestingly, can be considered a spiritual experience (Stone, 2012).

Although I am still skeptical, as is my nature, and will look into spiritual naturalism more thoroughly before "signing up," the revelation that I even have some sort of spirituality and it seems to be explained by spiritual naturalism has helped me to find the necessary connections to fill in the gaps in my practitioner theory while also helping me to re-integrate my own pieces. I am still mid-process, and I expect this process of re-integrating and re-imagining myself will be cyclical; however, I think I am now in a better place to understand, appreciate, and facilitate a similar process for my clients.

Exploring System Health

First of all, I am working from the assumption that all humans and human systems are living systems, thus organizations made up of people are living systems (Miller & Miller, 1991). Per Miller (1978), living systems are a special subtype of open systems. As "open systems,"

organizations are open, self-organizing, self-referencing, self-fractalizing systems that are interdependent with their context, in which material and energetic exchanges occur between the systems and their environments (Capra, 2004; Wheatley, 2006; Miller, 1978; Fitzgerald, 2002). Self-organizing systems generate their own organization, creating increasing levels of complexity with each new form. Self-referencing systems have all the information they need to be what they are and do what they do, and merely need to check with themselves to figure out what to do next. And self-fractalizing systems reproduce themselves in new iterations with the same essential pattern, increasing in complexity (Fitzgerald, 2002). These features of open systems are what makes Essential Explorations suitable for helping them get unstuck.

I will use the terms "living systems" and "open systems" somewhat interchangeably throughout this paper, though not all open systems are living systems. Incidentally, I have not seen evidence of a human or human system that is not a living system, even if it is rather closed off from its context. If I ever come across a zombie I may have to revisit the assumption that humans are living systems and make exceptions for the non-living humans and human systems. However, I doubt any zombies will be seeking Leadership or Organizational Development, so I think I am safe to consider human systems as living systems for the purposes of my practice.

Although Miller & Miller (1991) consider living systems as healthy when they are in a steady-state, and any living system spending a prolonged amount of time away from a steady state as experiencing pathology, I take the stance that a steady state is not healthy (as in the case of stuckness), and remaining at the edge of chaos does not indicate pathology. In fact, living in a state of non-equilibrium is a normal part of life as an open system that is interacting with its environment, and if a system remains at a steady state of equilibrium for too long it is behaving

as a closed system, stagnating and decaying (Wheatley, 2006). According to Fitzgerald (2002), equilibrium is tantamount to death, and a "chaordic system," one that contains both chaos and order, is at its healthiest when it is nearing its limits. It is here that the system can choose to emerge into a higher level of organization; settle into an equilibrium, though not for too long or it will die; or try to push through its limits, which would be like drinking the last drop of water in a desert and expecting to be able to find more water where none exists. Chaos theory provides a way to think about the health and pathology of open systems differently, allowing systems to get unstuck by emerging into new forms.

Therefore, I will utilize elements of chaos theory, with connections to neuropsychology, emotional intelligence, and spirituality, in order to explore system health in individual humans (as organismic systems in their own right) and collectives of humans (teams, groups, departments, organizations, etc).

Self-awareness and integration

A healthy system is self-aware. One way to think of self-awareness is to consider it an element of emotional intelligence. Accordingly, some elements of self-awareness are: knowing one's own emotions, strengths and limitation, and having a realistic sense of one's self-worth and capabilities (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002). In teams and other human systems, self-awareness includes awareness of group process, which is generated by team norms and ground rules. These team norms and ground rules are set and maintained by the leader (formal or informal) of the group (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002). However, this does not let the rest of the system off the hook for being self-aware. Mason (2007) found that self-organizing management and emergent strategy making processes (de-centralization and flexibility) appear to

be adaptive methods in the dynamic environments in which companies now find themselves. This requires more participation and accountability from the whole system. Therefore, the whole system needs to be self-aware, not just the formal leaders.

Furthermore, self-aware leaders and groups are aware of their values and goals, and make decisions based on these values and goals (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002). These elements are major parts of a system's identity. In other words, a healthy system is aware of, and has, a clear identity made up of values, culture, ideals and dreams, history, experiences, strengths and limitations (Wheatley, 2006; Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee, 2002). It is important for a system to be self-aware because the system's identity guides its decision-making (Wheatley, 2006). As a self-referencing system everything it needs to know about what it does can be found within (Fitzgerald, 2002). Thus, it has an internal guidebook for all its decisions.

In addition, although it is not always apparent, there is a pattern to a system's decisions. According to Svyantek and Brown, when taking measurements over time, patterns of behavior can be seen through mathematical modeling, and these patterns show us the boundaries of the system's behavior in the form of an attractor (2000). Think of the attractor as a gravitational pull. We are often oblivious to gravity, but it affects us every moment of every day. The attractor is the center around which all the system's behaviors occur. We can leap into the air, we can climb mountains, we can drive cross-country, and regardless of what behaviors we choose, we do not stray far from the Earth unless we decide to leave the Earth in a spaceship.

Taking a spaceship out into deep space is symbolic of us leaving our central values and identity behind. There is nothing to keep us grounded and our leaps into the air are not constrained by the pull of gravity. If we leave one set of values behind in a major change to

adopt other values, this would be like taking a spaceship to a planet with a different gravitational pull from Earth. The new gravitational pull would alter how high we can leap before being pulled back in, changing our behavioral patterns and creating a new identity formed around this new set of central values. When a system knows its values, it is able to make informed decisions, so that it does not leap off a tall building or try to pick up a boulder with one hand.

Interestingly, complex systems, such as human systems, have their own strange attractors, a type of attractor that does not follow the same path more than once, which makes the patterns even harder to see. Strange attractors are nonlinear, visual, symbolic representations of a system's behavior patterns over time, allowing us to see patterns that would otherwise be unapparent due to their chaotic properties (Eenwyk, 1991). Accordingly, enduring values that guide behavior can be considered strange attractors for the system (Boyter, 2012), creating a recognizable identity whereby the system always resembles itself (Eenwyk, 1991). Even with a large repertoire of behaviors, the central identity of the system is maintained, the patterns are just more complex than with a simple attractor. In considering that strange attractors are difficult to see without data from multiple points in time, a system's awareness of self through its history is also important, giving it the ability to see more than just a snapshot of where it is in the pattern at any given moment.

The early history of when a living system is formed generally determines its identity and thus its behavior patterns. The reason open systems are sensitive to initial conditions of their formations, even if formed a long time ago, is that every change an open system chooses to make is based on the system's identity, which is formed in relationship to its initial conditions (Capra, 2004). Complex systems choose their own destiny, which shows up in the form of iterations over

time, constrained by strange attractors (Eenwyk, 1991). Therefore, a system's history can tell us something about its identity that may not be apparent without multiple data points, helping to bolster awareness with a larger picture of the system's identity.

For instance, Teske (2006) describes the neuropsychological development of patterns of emotions, which are highly dependent upon context during early childhood development. These patterns become the foundation for future responses, preferences, and stories of who we are. Teske postulates that these patterns may be impossible to undo, or at least incredibly difficult to change (2006). Much like larger systems, neural pathways and functions are shaped by their interactions with their environment over time. And much like larger living systems, they are greatly affected by initial conditions. So-called enriched environments lay the foundation for larger neurons, greater dendritic spread, and production of enzymes (Teske, 2006). Thus, even though we have amazing neuroplasticity, the initial environment makes a large difference for healthy development of the human neural system, which is very important for all forms of intelligence.

Interestingly, the integration of two specific types of intelligence are implicated in self-awareness and system health. Gantt & Agazarian define "common sense" as using and integrating both intuitive knowledge and cognitive knowledge (2004). Similarly, Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee explain that humans, as meaning-making organisms, utilize intuition to help make meaning of data to make smart guesses in decisions (2002). Therefore, humans need access to data and cognitive knowledge as well as intuitive knowledge, integrating the two, in order to be self-aware and build healthy systems.

Additionally, integration in meaning-making humans is also important for spirituality. Solomon, as quoted by Stone (2012), says that spirituality must be both rational and passionate at once (integrating cognition and emotion). Additionally, it has been argued that the dualistic view of body and spirit as separate things creates a schism in which we are not a single whole, which alienates us from ourselves as well as our contexts (Teske, 2006). System health comes from awareness of all our parts and integration of those parts into a whole interactive self, including but not limited to emotional, cognitive, physical, and spiritual. This integrated self also interacts with its environment, and theoretically, healthy systems have healthy interaction with their environments.

Self in context: interdependence and connection

Systems with a clear identity awareness have greater freedom in deciding how they will respond, rather than react, to their environment. Open systems get to decide which environmental triggers they will respond to and how they will respond (Capra, 2004; Wheatley, 2006). As described in the section on awareness and integration, systems with a clear sense of identity are able to make conscientious decisions when interacting with the environment. This keeps them from trampling their values when the context offers them economic (or other) incentives to do so (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002). This allows the system to maintain integrity when interacting with its context.

Furthermore, open systems necessarily integrate with their contexts, acting as parts in a larger system. In fact, interconnection with one's context seems to be central to a meaningful and purposeful life for human beings (Siegel, 2011). A healthy interdependence and connection to the larger system(s) requires maintaining selectively permeable boundaries. For example,

organizational boundaries need to create clarity of where one system ends and the other begins (clear roles) and still allow for the exchange of information in both directions (Gantt & Agazarian, 2004). Information has been said to be the nourishment for people in an organization (Wheatley, 2006; Gantt & Agazarian, 2004), so it makes sense that a system would want to share and receive information from the larger context. Thus, a healthy organizational system has clarity of identity, of the whole system and its parts (clear roles), as well as where it fits in the larger context, and it has internal and external information-sharing networks.

According to chaos theory, a living system needs selectively permeable boundaries to survive (let alone thrive); if it were too closed it would move towards entropy and decay (Capra, 2004), and if it were too open it would cease to be an individual and all its parts would be absorbed by the larger system. Thus, selectivity is important. From other perspectives, these concepts are similar to core self and borrowed self from Bowen (Gilbert, 2006). Having a clear core self (identity) keeps a person from losing too much self to the family system. However, disconnecting from the family system altogether leads to its own problems and does not help the person regain core self. Ideally, the person has a strong core self and maintains connection to the family system, balancing differentiation (individual identity and awareness of self) and attunement (connection and awareness of other; Weber, 2012). Although no connection can truly be severed, barriers in connection diminish the health and vitality of the system in question as well as the larger system we all exist within (Fitzgerald, 2002). Open systems, therefore, need appropriate boundaries, but not barriers, between self and context in order to be as healthy as possible.

From an emotional intelligence perspective, awareness of context is important to maintaining a healthy relationship with said context. Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee (2002) note that social awareness and relationship management are important parts of emotional intelligence, including empathy, perspective-taking, awareness of contextual currents and politics, conflict management, collaboration, and catalyzing change. Additionally, being able to look from multiple perspectives, including different systemic levels, is important for system health. A team's ability to take various perspectives keeps it flexible, curious, open to diverse ideas, able to access more resources, and connected (via communication) to the larger context (Gantt & Agazarian, 2004). All of these elements give the system more options and opportunities when changes have to be made.

In addition, maintaining awareness of both self and context creates harmony. I am particularly fond of Siegel's "complexity choir" example demonstrating how harmonizing allows balance of individuality and connection. When the choir members were all singing the same note the experience was boring and individual identity was lost. When the choir members plugged their ears and were all singing different notes they were disconnected from the rest of the choir and the result was unpleasant noise with lots of individuals and no real choir (2011, p. 65-66). The choir had to balance individual identity with interconnectivity in order to make beautiful music.

Balance and diversity

Systems need balance of individual identity and connection with others/context, rationality and emotion, communication (not too much, not too little), perspective taking, keeping a central value/ideal and changing a central value/ideal when it no longer serves the

system, and various other elements. However, this does not mean the system should set up shop directly in the middle for everything they do. Balance is not a stagnant choice or steady state, it is a constantly managed flow. A healthy system is able to manage polarities rather than selecting a middle ground (or choosing one pole over another) in order to solve a problem (Johnson, 1996). This makes sense from a chaos theory perspective as well, as open systems are constantly in a state of flux, exchanging energy and matter with the environment (Capra, 2004; Wheatley, 2006). A system in flux cannot close off flow without risking death because closed systems move to entropy and decay (Capra, 2004). Thus, healthy systems must flex with the ebb and flow of life.

Consequently, a healthy system will contain diversity and will itself be an individual in a diversified context. Diversity in culture is important in the same way that biodiversity/genetic diversity is important for a species' survival; namely, it provides more opportunities for survival via different methods and different relationships with the environment (Fort, 1999). In addition, diversity in organizational practices within an industry are important for keeping the industrial environment dynamic (Mason, 2007) and to keep the failure of one organization from cascading through all the other organizations. Chaos theory suggests one protection against industrial homogeneity in that the same action taken by two different organizations (or the same organization at different times) will never lead to the same result because even small differences in the beginning lead to large differences over time (Thietart & Forgues, 1995). However, awareness and utilization of the wealth of resources that come from diversity is a healthier option than leaving oneself at the mercy of the environment. Awareness is key to seeing available options for responding to whatever the context throws at a system. And the more diversity there is, the more options are available.

Exploring System Dysfunction

Self-awareness and integration

Per Wheatley, "If a system is suffering, this indicates that it lacks sufficient access to itself. It might be lacking information, it might have lost clarity about who it is, it might have troubled relationships, it might be ignoring those who have valuable insights" (2006, p. 145). Basically, a system that lacks awareness of itself suffers, and suffering implies a lack of health. This applies at any level of a system, from an individual to a team, department, organization, city, state, country, etc. When a system loses sight of its identity, values, or relationship to its context it is either in dysfunction or on its way to dysfunction. It follows logically that if a self-aware system stands by its values (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002), a system lacking self-awareness is likely to trample on its own values, and if it has an extreme lack of self-awareness it might not even realize it is violating its own values.

Sadly a traumatized system may have a skewed view of self. A system's stories about itself contains clues about the level and types of health and dysfunction. Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee understand the power of myths, which is why they suggest managing myths by creating positive myths that support emotional intelligence and connection (2002). Otherwise, maladaptive stories can take hold. The stories can be classified as maladaptive if they focus on tragedy, and these stories can be amplified and magnified as they build with more examples and more people telling the stories (Teske, 2006). The negative effects are numerous, including a loss of self-confidence and an unrealistic assessment of strengths and limitations (with limitations seeming bigger, and strengths seeming smaller). There is also a cyclical aspect to stories; the stories lead to bias in perception, which feeds the maladaptive story as people block out

disconfirming evidence and pay attention to confirming evidence, thereby making inferences and creating stories about unrelated events (Ross, 1994). The stories create mental models, which we use as maps for how we see ourselves and the world around us (Roberts, 1994). These mental models help people to quickly make decisions, for better or worse, and to fill in the blanks when they do not have all the information.

For instance, gaps in communication leave room for people to create stories, spread rumors, and build maladaptive mythology throughout a group (Bushe, 2006; Teske, 2006). Within an organization, stories can originate from misunderstandings between people that are related to a difference in the intention of a person's action and the impact it had on another person. The intention is encoded by one person with a specific coding structure, built on that person's mental models, and it is decoded by the other person with yet another coding structure, built on that person's mental models (Wallen, n.d; Roberts, 1994). If the system does not seek and value clarity within itself, the individuals who are a part of the system will run amok with their different stories, creating divisiveness.

Additionally, re-traumatization can occur. There is a neurological aspect, whereby the traumatized person's brain is more sensitive to subsequent events that are similar (Teske, 2006). In fact, people's brains can distort perceptions of others' intentions. Siegel gives an example of someone with a history of abuse that might misinterpret the intention of someone raising a hand, which sets off cascading physiological reactions to the perception of anticipated abuse (2011). In addition, the myths told about past events cast the person or system into a role. They can be a helpless victim or a brave hero providing salvation, or they can also be the villain instigating the

trauma (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2000). By taking on a role, the system loses its identity and cuts off awareness of the other parts of itself, and it gets locked into a pattern of dysfunction.

When a system is divided and lacks wholeness it is not healthy. The separation of body and mind/spirit is an example of this; this internal division isolates us from ourselves, our communities, and our environmental context (Teske, 2006). If systems are not whole, their interactions with their context will lack integrity, and part of the system will be missing or hidden. Furthermore, if interconnection is central to human meaning and purpose (Siegel, 2010), then it follows to reason that disconnection will lead to loss of meaning and purpose.

Self in context: interdependence and connection

On an individual level, Porges explains that fear causes physiological and neurological responses that get in the way of being able to connect and relate with others (Dykema, 2006). Fear creates an automatic and reactive response that closes systems off from connection, which is akin to creating closed boundaries around the self. Thus fear is divisive and creates rigid boundaries, metaphorically and literally. For instance, a country may close its borders to newcomers in response to a real or perceived threat. Open systems, on the other hand, have permeable boundaries (i.e. selectively open boundaries) that make it possible for the system to receive inputs from the environment and give outputs back to the environment in an interactive manner that allows the system to grow and change autonomously (Capra, 2004). Therefore, a country with selectively open borders would be able to let in new ideas and resources that would allow the country to grow and change in a manner it chooses.

Another boundary-closing viewpoint is the "competence as control" viewpoint, which leads to boundary-building and turf protection in order to maintain a semblance of control and the appearance of competence (Gelatt, 1995). Turf protection is also mentioned by Oshry, which occurs when people at the top of an organization divvy out responsibilities and then become possessive of those responsibilities to the extent of creating turf wars. However, the isolation does not stop there because Middles in an organization are often part of isolated groups that they manage without connecting to similarly situated groups (Oshry, 2007). Depending on which level of the system one is viewing, these turf wars can be seen as a groups with strong boundaries to protect them within their context or they can be seen as an organizational system that lacks integrity and self-awareness.

Other signs of dysfunction from closed systems are reactivity, blaming, and low tolerance for differences and change. These symptoms indicate the person or group is stuck in a "personalizing perspective" and could use some help finding themselves in context and looking at situations from multiple perspectives and at multiple systemic levels: the larger organizational context, the outside environment including community, the customers, etc (Gantt & Agazarian, 2004). Such systems have a difficult time appreciating diversity, and lose out on the resources that would be available to them if they were able to cultivate respectful differentiation.

Balance and diversity

Per Eenwyk, efforts to enforce homeostasis in a chaotic system will often lead to an endless chaotic loop of suppression and regression where the same "problem" appears over and over again (1991). Diversity in responses is healthy, thus if a system moves to a simple and orderly state this signals dysfunction; for example, it has been found that a heartbeat with a

variable rhythm gives the heart the ability to respond to a variety of stimuli, whereas experts

used to think hearts should have a steady beat (Eenwyk, 1991). Similarly, efforts to stay balanced

in a stagnant manner by selecting the mid-point of any dynamic process and staying there are

bound to fail. Breathing in part-way and holding one's breath there is not a useful thing to do if

one wants to thrive. Similarly, a lack of responsiveness to the system's needs and/or the

environment is problematic, such as selecting one way of doing things and never adjusting based

on circumstances, unable to flow from one mode to another as needed (Johnson, 1996). This

would be like breathing in and never breathing out, or breathing out and never breathing in.

Many processes of living systems are dynamic and need to flow, so a system showing an

inability to flow is demonstrating dysfunction.

Exploring System Change

The chaos of change

According to Capra, the "spontaneous emergence of order at critical points of

instability… is technically known as self-organization and is often referred to simply as

'emergence'" (2004, p. 14). Basically, for a system to re-create itself rather than move towards

death, it spontaneously emerges at new (and higher) levels of organization when disturbances

trigger a response. Emergence occurs when a dissipative structure decides to restructure itself.

Fortunately, an open system decides which disturbances to notice and whether and how

the system will respond. The environment only triggers the structural changes; it does not specify

what the system should do (Capra, 2004). Thus, having a clear sense of its values and culture,

among other things, allows an organization freedom to decide how it will respond to changes in its environment.

Furthermore, any changes a system makes that do not fit the identity and values of the system will not stick. According to Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee, the goals must be a person's own and must fit smoothly into the person's life or the changes are not likely to last more than a few weeks (2002). On a more positive note, when a system has full awareness of itself and its way of thinking, the system has a greater ability to manifest and sustain change (Fitzgerald, 2002). Therefore, getting very clear about the system's identity before enacting changes is critical for success.

When all goes well, a system's personal vision will act as a strange attractor (Gelatt, 1995). According to Fitzgerald, an emotionally and mentally compelling vision acts as a super-magnet, pulling the system towards reaching its full potential (2002). When that happens, all the various groups in an organization gravitate around a core vision they hold in common (Senge, 1994), and will work towards the same goal. In turn, each group can find its own unique way to meet the goal, and various different decisions and methods can work in tandem as long as they stay within the bounds of the strange attractor. For instance, there are many different ways to live by the same value(s) and still work towards the same goal.

Nonetheless, emergence can be scary and unpredictable. Change in complex systems has a chaotic phase of acute uncertainty. The impact of changes in a chaotic system can only be predicted in the short term and are impossible to predict over the long-term (Thietart & Forgues, 1995). Therefore, a certain amount of flexibility and agility is required.

Basic principles of the Essential Explorations method

1) Humans, human groups, communities, and organizations are all open systems, which makes them capable of extraordinary, self-propelled change while relating interdependently to their context;

2) Thorough awareness of self and context is key to health and successful change;

3) Integrity/wholeness and adherence to personal values is important to keep a system at any level focused on what matters, giving it a guidebook for change;

4) Stretching to reach a vision while maintaining contact with context is the most fruitful method of self-directed change because there is a balance of self and context and a balance of idealism and groundedness;

5) Change takes time and does not always go as expected;

6) Major transitions require casting off old forms and creating new ones, but within this process there is a chaotic phase in which everything is possible and nothing is determined, which can be a very uncomfortable yet exciting place to be;

7) Rushing through the process usually creates a looping cycle in which the system ends up "dealing" with the same problems over and over again until the system takes its time

The Essential Explorations method

This is not necessarily a sequential list, and many of the steps may need to be revisited, such as brief re-joining at each meeting or re-visioning as necessary when new situational aspects come to light:

1) Join with and assess the system via a semi-structured interview to hear the story of where the system is and where it came from, keeping an ear out for comedic versus tragic story elements, sense of self and how self fits into context, and personalizing versus contextualizing statements;

2) Discuss with client my principles of change and what to expect in working with me to pursue transformational change, including the inevitably messy and unpredictable transition from one state to another, the need to remain open and flexible during transition, and to be prepared for change to take time;

3) Join the client system (involving everyone directly affected) in exploring salient aspects of the system's history, current status, and hopes for the future;

4) May include other assessments, such as 360 feedback or an emotional intelligence inventory, depending on circumstances and client need;

5) Work with client system to generate an idea of the ideal future state, an idealistic stretch (head in the clouds) grounded in contextual reality (feet on the ground), of the system which can become the Vision (this may be a short process or a long process, depending on various variables);

6) Help client system get clear on the current reality of the system (again, this could be a short process or a long process depending on client's awareness, which may need to be developed before moving forward, and other factors);

7) Assist client system in taking stock of system strengths and limitations as well as gaps between current reality and the ideal;

8) Keep Vision central while facilitating creation of a strategic plan to achieve small goals toward the larger goal of transformation, including important elements like

communication, openness to diverse opinions and ideas, connection, integration, autonomy, self-awareness, and other/context awareness;

9) Remind client that the strategic plan will need to be revisited regularly to keep it on the front burner, check for any modifications that may be needed due to system or context changes and/or unexpected variables (positive and negative), and to celebrate progress and mini-successes;

10) Help client to appropriately (authentically) mourn the form it is leaving behind and to generate excitement for the opportunities in this new phase;

11) If relevant, facilitate any personnel restructuring to best utilize the human resources they have and those they need to add—ideally everyone's skills, talents, and interests are put to good use and they all feel their contributions are meaningful to themselves and their context;

12) Close the loop with a final story (status report), even if my work with the client system ends at an intermediate stage

See Figure 1 below for a visual representation of the Essential Explorations Method. Double-click on the image to see the PowerPoint presentation taking the viewer through each step.
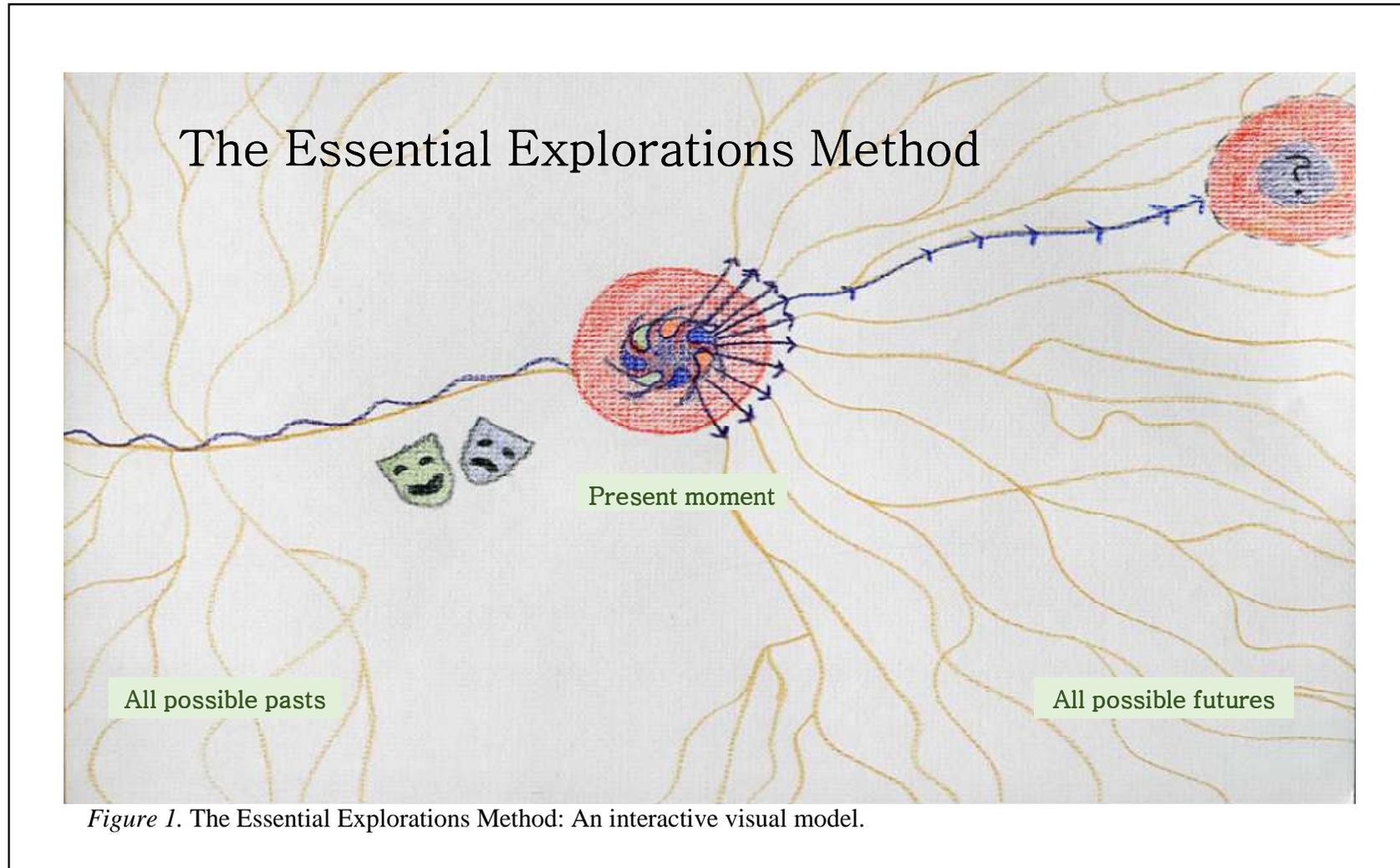

Figure 1. The Essential Explorations Method: An interactive visual model.

Similar principles and methods

I hold Vision, as developed from a clear sense of self, as a primary step in the change process. Thus, I have a similar process as others who focus on clarity of identity and Vision. As identity is based, in part, on a system's values, I agree that values are the glue that holds an organization together as change is needed (Dolan, Garcia, & Auerbach, 2003). Maintaining values is how a system makes a change without losing itself in the process. Accordingly, changing vision needs to maintain the essential elements that are sacred to the people involved, with the knowledge that some tightly held habits may need to be discarded, but any discarding needs to be driven by the people in the system that will be affected (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee 2002). In fact, the affected people need to be involved in the whole process whenever possible.

For example, a collaborative of health science center libraries had success with a major change initiative by including everyone in the process. They found a variety of unexpected benefits, such as increased individual and group relation to the mission/vision, and people (re)gained feelings of interconnection as they learned more about the system as a whole, where they fit in it, and how decisions made in one area may affect other areas. They also learned some lessons along the way, such as the need to identify their user base and perform a detailed needs assessment, training and agreements regarding the use of technology (e.g. check email several times a day), provide clarity so that staff do not think that staff-driven change means downsizing or other negative connotations but is actually an opportunity for them to shape their own workplace, celebrate small victories and task completion, and keep lines of communication open.

(Kuntz, Tennant, Case, & Meakin, 2003). Involving everyone created a large, chaotic, slow

process; however, it proved invaluable for them.

In addition, it is necessary to build vision by starting at a point appropriate to where the

organization is. The discrete types/stages of visioning are: telling, selling, testing, consulting, and

co-creating (Smith, 1994). The libraries were at a place where they could co-create, but other

systems may need to start with a selling strategy that stretches into a testing strategy.

Additionally, Gelatt's word "Imagineering," which combines imagine and engineering,

describes how I see the visioning process. After getting clear on identity, the system works to

imagine an ideal (but achievable) Vision and then creates the method to get there. During the

creation of the method for getting to the Vision, I agree with Gauthier that a clear awareness of

the gap between reality and vision needs to be determined, a reasonably achievable number of

strategically important goals to be accomplished in the next couple of years needs to be decided

(Gauthier says 4 or 5), and the strategic goals need to be linked back to the vision and the

capabilities of the people or committees involved (1994). These steps basically describe what

happens after the Vision is created, and seem rather reasonable to me.

Another set of practitioner methods that appeal to me are based on a combo of chaos

theory, spirituality, and career counseling. The following are the aspects that seem most vital to

me: stressing the opportunity for creativity that occurs at transition points, while recognizing

phase transitions, attractors of the past, and fitness peaks; utilizing narrative and play for helping

clients seek contentment; listening to the stories to help clients find links and nodes of networks,

and the use of storytelling to help clients identify who they are and where they fit in the larger

picture; using concepts of complexity theory to help reduce client discomfort (assuming the

concepts of complexity theory do not increase their discomfort); identifying patterns and

dynamics (attractors) and how they influence the system; recognize the need to feel

connections—the spiritual aspect of work; stress the opportunities presented by phase transitions

during the uncertainty (Bloch, 2005). I particularly appreciate the attention to the individual's

stories. I believe many of these methods can be extended to a system larger than an individual.

Exploring My Relationship to Personal Myths

In realizing how malleable my personal mythology is, I have been able to re-write small

portions of my mythology with new information, new attitudes, and more contextualization, and

less personalization (Gantt & Agazarian, 2004; Cloke & Goldsmith, 2000). As I do this, my

compassion for members of my family of origin increases and I am able to alter the trajectory of

my future. With subsequent re-writes, I expect I will be able to infuse my future with more joy

and health.

Experiences of re-writing my mythology have influenced my theory of practice greatly. I

am convinced that anyone can re-write their stories if the process and benefits are explained to

them in a way that makes sense for them personally. For me, reading about the neuropsychology

(and neuromythology) of personal stories has led to breakthroughs in my understanding of how

stories can be re-written, however difficult, and why it is beneficial (Teske, 2006). For other

people, it may be other ways of knowing that convincingly demonstrate the benefits of becoming

aware of their personal mythologies and updating them to create hope and the ability to re-

imagine futures for the better. This is where my strength of individualization comes in because I

learn about individuals I work with and find out what speaks to them so I can present the process

and benefits in a way that makes sense for them, and then they too can reap the benefits of re-writing their personal mythologies.

One of the things I have noticed about myself in relation to my culture of origin is that it is different from the relationship others in similar circumstances had with the same culture of origin. I attribute much of this difference to my sense of humor. I enjoy laughing at the absurdities of life. When I notice them, I often take them less seriously than other people I know because they amuse me. I could allow myself to be frustrated, hurt, or minimized by many of the strange circumstances I find myself in, but I get through them more easily and am less damaged by the interactions when I am able to find humor in them.

I cannot say that I always manage to take this stance, but when I do my life is much more enjoyable and I perceive myself as having more control over my own destiny. I think the answer is to be aware of the constraints of context without seeing them as rigid. The bubbles we live in can stretch and flex, allowing for amazing and sometimes unexpected results when pushing at the edges. This informs my theory of practice because I want my clients to be aware of their contexts without letting those contexts hold them back from reaching their visions. The key is to keep one foot on the ground at all times while stretching to reach that vision; or, in other words, the key is to push on the edges of the bubble without bursting it. Bubble-stretching is a creative enterprise because a new space is created that did not exist before, a new path, a new opportunity, a new interaction pattern. It can be difficult and rewarding.

This ability to stretch bubbles has served me well. It helps me to get unstuck, to embody my personal power, and often helps open up possibilities for others. I am always happier doing my own thing, seeking my own vision, following my own path. Sometimes I forget that, or allow fear to get in the way of forging my own way. As I peek out from my latest cycle of stuckness, I

feel compelled to help others create their own paths based on their own identities and visions. And the best way to start is by leading the way with my own renewal of path-forging.

Exploring Mutual Influence

In researching chaos theory and emotional intelligence for my practitioner theory, I have come to learn more about myself in the process. And in researching archaeology, 19th century naturalism, and spiritual naturalism to formulate more about my authentic presence, I have been able to make connections between my way of being, my way of thinking, and my way of doing (my presence, theory, and method, respectively).

I am a curious explorer, compelled to forge new paths by myself and with others. I imagine I already had this inclination when I discovered books, but it was taken to new heights via both fiction and non-fiction books I found in libraries. My favorite book as a child, which I re-read more than any other book, was *On Beyond Zebra* by Dr. Seuss (1955). One of the characters shows another character the alphabet he invented that goes beyond the letter "Z," and all the amazing things he gets to see that other people do not see because they do not go past the letter "Z." He says, "You'll be sort of surprised what there is to be found once you go beyond Z and start poking around" (Seuss, 1955, no page number). Later he says, "So, on beyond Z! It's high time you were shown that you really *don't* know all there is to be known" (Seuss, 1955, no page number). Dr. Seuss may also have been one of the influencing factors that allows me to laugh at the absurdities of life. *On Beyond Zebra* combines several of my favorite things: acquisition of special knowledge that almost no one knows, discovery, absurd and nonsensical words and ideas, wordplay, and going beyond the ordinary to amazing new places. I have long believed that if I go beyond the ordinary I will end up somewhere amazing, potentially of my own creation.

Additionally, I often feel suffocated by the status quo, sometimes for no particular reason except that it feels stagnant like stale air. In that sense, forging new paths is not just for discovery, but also to open up some breathing space. When I am healthy (aware of who I am, integrated, aware of my context, and connected to my context), I can create openings for myself and others that provide more opportunities and resources for growth and change. Because I am interacting with my environment, the environment is also changed by the new openings, ideally for the better. I have done this on several occasions, often without actually knowing that I was forging a new path.

Oftentimes, when I am forging new paths I am exploring—on a quest to discover the essence of things. The essence not only explains *what* something is, but also what it *does* and *why* it does it. And although science cannot tell my *why* something exists or does what it does, only *how*, I want to find these things out anyway. As a meaning-making creature, I piece together what I can from observable data and then make inferences and test them. If I do not understand something that piques my interest or puzzles me, I will research it thoroughly until I am satisfied with the explanation. On the one hand, I think this is easily explained by human nature and a desire to have life make sense. On the other hand, understanding the essence of things is more fundamental to me. At the surface level it is about control and predicting in an unpredictable world.

However, even when I feel safe and joyful, with no need to control or predict anything, I am compelled to find the essence of things. Very simply stated, this is how I connect. I need to feel connected to the world around me in order to have meaning and purpose, a reason to live. And I connect at the core; I connect via essence. I am not connecting with a rock because it is hard and smooth. I am not connecting with the trees in a forest because they have bark, roots,

limbs, and leaves. I am not connecting with you because you have eyes and a nose, work at such and such job, and have accomplished A, B, and C. My essence is connecting with the essence of everything around me. Sometimes I forget this and get caught up in the concerns of control and predictability. Yet, what it really comes down to is connection.

Thus, I am strongly compelled to find out what something is, deep down, at the essential level. And as any good archaeologist, I do my best to conscientiously, systematically, and gently dig up artifacts and other evidence (Archaeological Institute of America Education Department, n.d.) to piece together a coherent story of what was, what is, and what may be. In the realm of human relations, this could be considered my use of emotional intelligence in situations where I am trying to determine the essence of a problem, a pattern, or a puzzle. Getting to the essence is not necessarily the final point though; the essence can be the jumping off point for decisions to make changes (or not). And much like determining the identity of a system, knowing the essence of a situation helps to tailor changes for better outcomes.

From an open systems perspective, humans and other open systems make decisions based on their own essence in relation to the environment (Capra, 2004; Wheatley, 2006). The method of Essential Explorations starts with the identity of the system, via the narrative, for this reason.

Accordingly, my practitioner theory is intimately linked with my authentic presence, as is evidenced in the introduction of this paper. My beliefs, my focus, my approach, and my understanding of the world all stem from my authentic presence. In considering myself in the most basic sense, I see myself as being driven by curiosity about the essence of things that is moderated by emotional intelligence elements, such as compassion. And this shows up in my practitioner theory of practice. My theory of practice is a way to channel my curiosity and emotional intelligence into something productive and meaningful, which is necessary for my

own health as a system. This is not to say that I will not continue to follow my curiosity down rabbit holes in my spare time.

My practice is a way to focus some of that curious energy toward helping others (people, organizations, communities, the planet, perhaps the universe), which is important to me and my purpose. In asking the essential questions, I act as the "unstuckness" catalyst and idea tester. My purpose is not to build systems, it is to help systems get to the essence of things in order to get unstuck and create water-tight strategies for moving forward. And perhaps my willingness to forge new paths will encourage others to do the same, which may come in handy for clients if none of the visible paths available to them really meet their needs, wants, and vision.

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