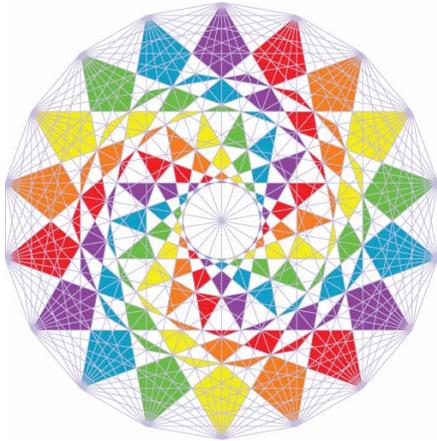


The Ecology of Ecology Movements

What do we need to share with one another, or support in one another, in order to make a movement that will be sustainable across decades or centuries? -- by Dennis Rivers -- 1/10/2011 revision



Drawing by Adam Apollo Walsh

Introduction

Mutual arising is a very fundamental idea that comes to us from many traditions, especially Native American (“all my relations”), Buddhism (*pratitya samutpada*) and holographic theory in physics. *Mutual arising* sees everything as coming into being in dynamic relation to everything else. Nothing is complete or fully formed by itself. In this article I will use *mutual arising* as a way of understanding how to build stronger movements for positive social change and ecological action.

Technology challenges democracy and ecology. As new technologies radically change the world in which life will thrive or wither, there is a need for new citizen advocacy groups to arise and help their societies in at least four ways. I see these as: (1) understanding the hazards of the new technologies, (2) weighing the *full* costs versus the promised benefits, (3) taking reasonable preventive measures to avoid more technological blunders such as Chernobyl and corn-as-auto-fuel induced food shortages. In these first three roles, citizen advocate groups act as antibodies in the body of the world, sniffing out and attacking technologies that threaten the well-being of the planet. The fourth role is to champion and spread health-producing ways of living, such as organic gardening, vegetarianism and permaculture, when the powerful institutions in society have become overly invested in illness-producing ways, such as making herbicides, pesticides, cigarettes and greasy, heart-disease-inducing hamburgers. The people in such institutions often deceive themselves into “not seeing” the consequences of their actions. Here the citizen advocacy groups act as the eyes

of the body of the world, seeing a new path forward because the advocates have no investment in the old path.

An intuitive list of twelve elements of mutual support in a movement: A many-pointed star. One great advantage of the many-pointed-star model is that I do not have to assert which of these comes first or which items are the most important. Each item gives greater depth to all the others, and actually depends on all the others. That is what makes this a “mutual arising” model. This list might become the basis of a kind of organizational health check up for existing movements, and a kind of recipe list for movements just getting started. Underneath the design of the many pointed star model is the principle that the more we intend to ask of one another, the more deeply we need to support one another.

1. Journey. A goal, challenge or animating question, or a cluster of a few related goals and questions, that can be expressed as a **journey story**. From oppression to liberation, from slavery to freedom, from sickness to health, from out-of-balance to in-balance, and from ignorance to understanding, are some of the great human journey themes. Each of the journey themes can be expressed as a powerful “how will we go from...” question. As Sam Keen observes, your question is the “quest you’re on.” Questions allow movements to have goals that are not completely specified, to have a sense of direction even when shape of the final destination is unclear.

2. Practices. A set of practices that embody aspects of the goal now and move us toward greater realization of the goal. Non-violence, organic gardening, Quaker “clearness committees,” civil disobedience, The Work That Reconnects, compassionate listening, vegetarianism, boycotting genetically modified foods, and “no one speaks twice until everyone has spoken once,” are examples. Here is where Gandhi would have us apply the teaching that “the means are the ends.”

3. Principles and Paradigms. A set of guiding principles and paradigms to apply, that are consistent with the goals and that help us think our way through conflicts between people, between practices, between goals, between present and future. (A paradigm in this context would be a strong analogy or guiding reference example, such as saying that “life is like a garden, (or like a Broadway musical, or like a football game), therefore we need to...” or saying “What goes around, comes around, therefore we need to...”.) Many times, an organization’s paradigms are held without conscious evaluation or agreement, as in the idea of politics as war or football (where one side can win by making the other side lose).

4. Inspiring personalities who embody the journey, and thus convey a deep **personal permission** to make the journey. These are the saints, heroes and exemplars who empower us by their example to do something different

than what is going on around us. Gandhi, the Dalai Lama, Rachael Carson, John Muir, Sister Dorothy Stang, Aung Sang Suu Kyi (of Burma), the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., Archbishop Oscar Romero, Dan and Philip Berrigan, Dan Ellsberg (Pentagon Papers) and the ecology scholars and activists Joanna Macy, John Seed, Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme, come immediately to mind as a “cloud of empowering witnesses” for contemporary eco-activists.

5. Program of action represents the next steps to reach the goals while living the principles and engaging in the practices. In my experience, the nonviolent blockade of the Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant construction site, and the Lawrence Livermore nuclear weapons design facility (death machine factory), were ways that goal of “protecting Mother Earth and all your brother and sister species” has gotten translated into programs of specific actions at a specific times and places, coordinating the efforts of thousands of individuals belonging to many groups.

6. Ways to participate in the program of action, clear roles to play in the community, ways of becoming members/co-workers/supporters. Ways to start new chapters of an organization. Ways to progress within an organization by taking on more responsibility. A graduated set of offices that one might hold, and functions that one might perform. This often models the human life-cycle in that we start out by exploring, learning and doing the simplest tasks, and then we gradually become responsible for nurturing the exploring, learning and task accomplishment of others. Summer camp attendees gradually become summer camp counselors, and apprentices gradually become master craftspeople who supervise other apprentices.

7. Personal development and self-care: becoming more human while trying to make the world a better place. (Gandhi: Be the change you want to see.) How am I growing in skill, understanding, awareness, experience, compassion, forgiveness, gratitude, creativity, etc., via my participation in the movement’s program of action? How does the group encourage its members toward their personal survival and personal best? How does the group understand / facilitate / expand the horizons of self-care and human development for its participants? A volunteer does not stop being a person in need of development, fulfillment and self-care the moment they show up to volunteer. By way of analogy, in order to feed others for a few minutes, we ourselves do not need to eat right then; but if we intend to feed others for weeks or months, then we ourselves must also find food and take the time to eat.

8. Processes & practices for learning from the group’s experience, from the group’s mistakes, and from the successes and failures of other groups and communities, so that all the other points on the star can be refined, and new understandings incorporated. The exploratory attitude that cause Gandhi to title his autobiography *My Experiments*

With Truth. Organizations that learn are an emerging focus of attention of such teachers/teachings as Peter Senge, Theory U, Presence, the MIT group, Margaret Wheatley and Marshall Rosenberg. Exploring the transition from “leadership” to mutual assistance, co-creation and empowerment. *The Work That Reconnects*, as developed by Joanna and Fran Macy presents experiential exercises and learning as a key elements in thinking outside the box of the industrial growth society.

9. Emotional aliveness and expression through council / dance / movement / song / art. Making space for both celebration and lament, joys and sorrows, successes and frustrations, fears and hopes, regrets and gratuities. In Joanna Macy’s work, this is the journey beyond numbing out and freaking out when faced with enormous challenges such as global warming and nuclear weapons. Examples include The Dances of Universal Peace, and from *The Work That Reconnects*, The Elm Dance, Spiral, and Truth Mandala.

10. Periodic brainstorming, creative exploration and appreciative inquiry. “Seeing With New Eyes” in *The Work That Reconnects*. (also open to embrace mistakes as possible emergent properties) Beginners Mind: Scanning the horizon in a spirit of openness for new possibilities, incorporating lessons that other people/organizations have learned, sharing “best practices.” This represents learning that is not driven by mistake-making. Appreciative inquiry: focusing on strengths rather than failings, community strength mapping.

11. Friendships and adopted/extended family. We are made by Mother Nature to go through life in the company of one another. Thus, we will bring into every group we enter our need for meaningful connectedness and communication. Social change and ecology movements vary in how much they acknowledge and respond to those needs. One way of responding is to set up a “buddy system” or a “homeroom system” so that people do not pass through (and perhaps out of) the organization as isolated individuals. Communication training can be an important form of community building.

12. An explicit culture and practice of gratitude / a persistent opening to the experience of beauty. Without a conscious and deliberate practice of gratitude and openness to beauty, participants in ecology and social change movements can run the risk of being overwhelmed by the pain and ugliness of what we have done to one another and to our brother and sister species. (One resource for deepening our path of gratitude is Brother David Steindl-Rast’s book, *Gratefulness, The Heart of Prayer*, which views the spiritual life as completely about gratitude.) Because eco-politics often requires us to say a powerful “NO” to the forces of oppression and destruction, I have found it deeply necessary to come back again and again to nurture my capacity to say “YES” to life.