

# August Morning: A time for Reflection and an Invitation...

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*This paper started life as a note to myself as I sought to explore the disparity between my home here in Maine, the forest, lake, and loons... and the rushing maelstrom of the world about me that showed up in the instant on my computer screen. Call it anxiety adjustment, therapy, or just an attempt to make some sense out of things. Perhaps it should have remained in that personal, private compartment, but I also felt the need to share, and so I have. You will have to decide the wisdom of that decision. Ho*

Late August is a treat here in Maine. The Fall and Winter storms have yet to arrive, and the summer heat is gone. This particular morning the sky is a cloudless blue, and the wind but a zephyr. The usual suspects can be seen on the lake. Young geese practicing their landings and take offs, getting ready for the journey south. The loons are coming together in sociable groups – a very different pattern of behavior from the spring and early summer when they lived in wide dispersion, fiercely guarding their territory. Now they gaggle in groups of ten or more. Who knows what they are talking about, but the eerie conversation is unending. The experience is eternal – at least eternal from my limited perspective of 75 years. The rocks and the forest are as they have always been, and the bitter sweet finale of summer is a time of ending and new beginning. It is always the same and endlessly different. A time of reflection.

I am sitting at my desk in a spot made familiar by the years. Before me is the forest, deep and green with little patches of sunlight dappling the ground. To my left is the lake with the mountains beyond. But my fingers touch the world in ways I couldn't even imagine when first I sat here. With a mouse click or two my reality is expanded with news from all corners of the planet, and messages from friends and colleagues. Roller coaster rides on the world economy, old nation states holding on for dear life, rising hopes and expectations for peoples long suppressed, and a planetary fever which bodes not well for polar bears and all living creatures. It all seems so far away from the still silence of the forest and the cry of the loons – but it is all of a piece, I know. A time of ending and new beginning. A time of reflection.

There are those who are sure the end is neigh. Buy gold and head for the hills – Get out of here! The idea does have some attraction, but the flaws are painfully obvious. There is no “out” to get

to, and gold only has value in some sort of working economy. And for sure you can't eat it. Besides, gold bullion gets awfully heavy when you lug it into the hills.

The more reflective among us have busied themselves analyzing the emergent maelstrom and constructing plans and designs to fix the situation. A commonly expressed hope is that we may get back to "normal" – given the right leader, right political party, right plan. It occurs to me, however, that our present experience may well be normal, and that there is no back to return to.

One of the words that shows up rather frequently in the several discussions is "asymmetrical," as in asymmetrical warfare, asymmetrical diplomacy. The rough translation seems to be, "The other side is not playing by the accepted rules, and we don't understand the rules by which they are playing." For the military, the enemy (the Taliban, for example) doesn't show up in uniform, or play by the standard rules of war. For the diplomats the problem is the same but a different flavor. In the "good old days" ambassadors from nation states would meet to negotiate a treaty which they could sign. Today much diplomacy is conducted in an amorphous world of rebel "governments" with leaders of unknown stature and authority. Goodbye good old diplomatic code of procedure! As they say – It's asymmetrical! But who's sense of symmetry are we talking about? And if it is ours – by what right do we claim its normative status?

Interesting questions, but such questions could well be mooted before we ever find an answer. The Rules of War and the diplomatic code are products of an age and a world view which had a keen sense of order, and more to the point, knew within broad limits what that order was and should be. There were nation states with defined boundaries governed by a power structure (hierarchical, of course) which was definitely in control. In a word, there was a comfortable symmetry. With this symmetry in place, you could make plans, devise strategies, and thereby conduct the orderly business of state. Of course there were disagreements and conflicts which required a certain tweaking of the system symmetry, or maybe even a re-design, but at least you knew where you were starting. The League of Nations was succeeded by the United Nations, but at a fundamental level it was all more of the same. And anything else is asymmetrical.

But here's a thought. Supposing *everything* is asymmetrical? Or what would be perhaps more distressing – everything is so complex, interconnected and fast moving that even though patterns of symmetry may exist, our capacity to comprehend, and certainly control, is so limited as to be non-existent. Not only would the world be out of joint, as we perceive it, we could do little, if anything, to rectify the situation. And certainly our previous tools of the trade (planning, system design, to say nothing of the Diplomatic Code or The Rules of War) are inadequate for the task.

Ridiculous thought, perhaps. But consider two facts of our collective life on Planet Earth. First, there are presently some 7 billion of us. Second, The Internet. The goal of global interconnectivity is obviously not a present reality, but it could be. And at the very least, there are millions, perhaps billions on the planet today, all plugged in – and 20 years ago, most of those people had never even seen a computer. So there is something of a curve here, and we can see the direction. Just for the sake of the argument, follow the curve and think about the possibilities. 7 billion folks all connected!

Most of the possibilities are simply unthinkable – but one would be a reality. When it came time for a global conversation on critical issues – *there could be 7 billion people at the conference table*. Mind boggling at the least, but we have already seen the leading edges – The Arab Spring, for example, or just a normal day in the Twitter World of the USA, China, or Western Europe. Now, Mr Ambassador, please convene the conference and take charge! And of course you must observe the standard diplomatic procedures.

Our Ambassador could be forgiven for blanching at the situation. It is one thing when you understand that part of the world is “asymmetrical” – and quite something else when it all is. Suddenly the aberrant becomes the normative, the exception the rule – and for sure we are in a very different world. A time for endings and new beginnings. An opportunity for reflection.

7 billion people at the conference table may be something of a stretch, but even if you cut the number by substantial proportions the fundamental issue remains unchanged. It is mind boggling to the Nth degree – especially when considered with the mind(set) to which we have grown accustomed. As long as you can see the world in neat, and potentially manageable, “packages” called Nation States, controlled by a predictable structure, and managed by commonly accepted practices (the good old diplomatic procedure), some degree of sanity and possibility remains. But that world seems to be slipping away, if in fact it has not already departed. And the number of people at the table is only the tip of the iceberg: it is all those potential connections and groupings which can manifest in an instant and transform in a moment – that really drive the complexity index off the charts. Infinity would be a good number to start with, and in practical terms, “infinity” is just another way of saying, “unknown and unknowable.” Good luck Mr. Ambassador!

Under the circumstances, some all powerful global Dictator almost seems like a good idea. Or perhaps two such dictators in the mode of the USSR and the USA in the days of the Cold War. Obviously there were points of disagreement, periods of conflict and anxiety, but generally

speaking, order was preserved. Unfortunately, this emergent, asymmetrical world seems to be particularly hard on Dictators, as we have seen in Tunisia, Egypt and Lybia. Of course, these were just petty tyrants, but the handwriting does appear to be on the wall. Millions of people, previously unknown and nor heard from, showed up “at the table.” And all the rest is history – which has yet to be written.

Perhaps the time is right to bite the bullet and admit that it is not that we are doing something wrong – *we are doing the wrong thing*. If we were only doing something wrong, there is always the possibility that with greater effort and clearer thinking, we might just get it right. Update the Diplomatic Code, re-design the Nation State, for openers. And in truth, many good souls are hard at work doing just that and much more. But there is a nasty truth, which may apply in this instance. If we do more and more of what we’ve always done, it is quite likely that we get additional quantities of what we’ve always got.

And what would be the alternative? We might start with the possibility that this asymmetric world, which appears as the confounding nemesis to our perception of the ordered environment in which proper statecraft is practiced between proper nation states – is in fact replete with its own patterns and symmetries. The only problem is, they are not of our design or making, and for sure we cannot control them. We might then see that the problem of asymmetry was a monster of our own making, a self inflicted wound, so to speak. The alternative would be to become familiar with those patterns and symmetries, adapt to them – get with the program, as it were. The learning curve would doubtless be steep, but the result could be significant. Instead of fighting the river we could learn to go with the flow. This need not mean that we simply caste our fate to the winds and retire to irrelevance. For even on a mighty river there are useful strategies and approaches for achieving our objectives. But you have to know the currents and learn to ride the flow, effectively multiplying the impact of your efforts.

Of course there are those among us who propose that the way forward is to dam the river and control its limits. Flood Control, I think it is called. But on occasion, and those occasions always occur at inopportune moments – Old Man River and Mother Nature conspire to remind us of our limited role in the grand scheme of things.

A fairy tale? Perhaps, but there appears to be an emerging consensus in the scientific community, combined with some practical, on the ground experience that, at the very least, raises the level of probability.

The word from the world of science might, in retrospect, appear to be a blinding flash of the obvious, but the obvious sometimes hides in plain sight. It is common knowledge that the universe has been around for some time and assumed its present shape and composition without benefit of human intervention. The dating is now more precise, something on the order of 13.7 billion years, and we of course are very late arrivals. The obvious question is how did that happen? The traditional answer is that God did it, and I personally have no problem with such an answer. But a question persists – How did he or she pull it off?

Starting in the '70's with the work of Ilya Prigogine, a strange, and strangely counterintuitive phenomenon was observed. Order came out of chaos, all by itself – no help needed. Over succeeding years, traveling under such banners as Chaos Theory, Complexity Theory – physicists, chemists, climatologists, and more recently biologists (Stuart Kauffman) have noted the same thing, and have progressively refined and deepened their observations. We now have names, Complex Adaptive Systems (Santa Fe Institute) or Self Organizing Systems – which all come into being and sustain themselves following certain, very simple “rules.” – all by themselves. It seems that the natural flow of the cosmos is from order, to chaos, to new and more complex order. Ants do it, stars do it, bees do it – and the big question is – do we do it? Is humanity, in all of its parts and pieces, also a Complex Adaptive System? At some level it would be very strange if we were not, for if self organization is a fundamental mechanism underlying all of the cosmos, we might equally escape the force of gravity.

The idea, however, is not a popular one, for if true we would have to redo much of our thought and actions regarding organizations of all sizes, up to and including the Nation State. After all it is an article of faith, if not the core of all Business School curriculums, that organizations are a matter of our design and creation. We manage and control them. And that position, of course would be rather close to that of the diplomatic community, who see their role as managing, hopefully controlling, and occasionally creating, a world of Nation States. The same people who now unfortunately, find their life complicated by “asymmetrical diplomacy.” So perhaps there is room for discussion?

Just suppose, for the sake of the argument, that it were true: We, along with all the rest of the cosmos, were essentially self-organizing. If so, could we learn to leverage the natural power of self organization in order to achieve useful results? Like new products, services, resolution of conflicts, deeper and more effective communities, and more? Mixing our metaphors, could we call upon the complex flow of self organization to do the heavy lifting in our hypothetical

conference of 7 billion souls – even as the mighty Mississippi has carried the fruit of the heartland from the source to the sea?

We are a long way from anything looking like a definitive answer, but an interesting 25 year natural experiment has brought us, I believe, to a point where the answer is no longer an esoteric hypothetical. My friends and colleagues will know exactly where I am heading: Open Space Technology (OST). For those of you unfamiliar with OST, a brief description is in order. OST is a simple process which enables groups of people to deal with hugely complex and conflicted issues with little advance preparation and minimal facilitation. At the beginning the group is invited to sit in a circle and create a bulletin board (usually the wall) with their issues of concern. A market place of ideas is then opened to negotiate time and place of meeting, and everybody goes to work. Agenda creation (“organizing the meeting”) takes 30-40 min even with very large groups, and the facilitators role is limited to a 15 minute introduction. After that, everything runs all by itself. A typical OST lasts 1 to 2 ½ days and may involve 5 to 3000 people. OST first appeared in 1985 and subsequently been employed several hundred thousand times in 136 countries with virtually every sort and condition of persons on the planet. Subjects covered range from organization renewal/change, community planning, peace in the Middle East, software and architectural design for major undertakings, to name a few.

If the process is unremarkable, the results are not. First, OST always works – provided certain conditions are present. A real issue of concern, lots of complexity, rich diversity of opinion and participants, plenty of conflict and passion, and a genuine sense of urgency. Perhaps most remarkable, it all takes place pretty much, “all by itself.” There is no advance agenda preparation, participant training, and little facilitation except for the 15 minute “opener.” Observed behaviors are no less interesting. Hugely conflicted parties treat each other with respect, verging on affection (Palestinians and Israelis) and productivity is high. For example a complex architectural design for a \$200,000,000 building was completed in 2 days, contrasted to the 10 month to a year “normal” time. And if you want more, a quick Google will get you started.

It is reasonable to ask – what on earth is going on. At the conclusion of one gathering, the AT&T executive in “charge” was overheard to mumble, “It’s magic.” I don’t believe that for a moment, but it is true that OST violates virtually every single principle and practice of meeting management, and indeed management itself that I am aware of – and I have never had anybody challenge me on this point. One might reasonably call OST “asymmetrical! Which returns us to the question – what on earth is going on? I believe I know, but it has been a slow process.

Over my 25 year sojourn with OST it eventually came clear to me that OST worked because self-organization worked. What was new and different was that the constituent elements were not molecules, atoms, ants, or weather systems – the usual objects of study, but groups of human beings. Apparently human beings, like all other elements of the cosmos, responded to the sometimes gentle call to self organize. Surprise!

My breakthrough came whilst reading Stuart Kaufmann’s “At Home in the Universe” in which he argues that life happened by way of self-organization. I don’t know that the scientific community would consider Stuart’s point proved, but I do know that he is taken seriously. Amongst many other things he offers a precise delineation of what he considered to be the “initiating conditions” for self organization. What struck me was that his “initiating conditions” were almost exactly the “preconditions for Open Space” (see above) which I had described several years previously in an effort to help my colleagues with the job of opening space. It may be sloppy or wishful thinking, but in the moment I found myself saying – If it walks like a duck, looks like a duck, and quacks like a duck – I’d call it a duck. I haven’t changed my opinion about ducks or Open Space. It is self-organization, beginning, middle, and end. What may be new and different is that OST is intentionally initiated self-organization with human beings. And at precisely that moment OST moved in my mind from being an interesting group process to become a wonderful natural experiment which has now been run thousands of times by hundreds of “experimenters,” all with comparable results. The learning has been intense, and I think it all applies to the subject of asymmetry and what to do about it.

The first lesson may be the most eye-catching. The awesome force of self organization can, in fact, be called upon to assist the human endeavor. To be sure that assistance is “offered” in the rather limited context of the common meeting or conference, but considering how much time is spent, and effort expended, in designing, producing and running such events, this assistance is of some consequence. When we consider the efficiencies achieved, that level of consequence rises sharply. Instead of the days, weeks, and in some cases years devoted to conference design and agenda preparation – all of that is accomplished in something like half an hour. An added benefit is the relevance of the agenda to the moment. Agendas prepared 6 months in advance are virtually guaranteed to be outdated by the pace of events.

We should not forget the further cost savings under the heading of “Facilitation.” Even with groups of several thousand, the service of a single facilitator is sufficient. And he or she only plays what might charitably be called a “bit part.” Gone are the armies of facilitators, onsite program management committees, and the endless “conference re-design sessions” when it

appears that something may not be working quite right. It (OST) simply works, all by itself. Always – given the necessary pre-conditions (see above). Of course, there could always be a first time failure, which would be a wonderful opportunity for new learning. But I am not holding my breath after all these years, and multiple iterations.

The major significance of OST, however, is less about conference efficiencies and productivity than being a rich learning environment which will assist us to become comfortable citizens of a self-organizing, asymmetric (as we would see it) world. We have learned over the 25 year experiment with OST that the initial experience of virtually all participants is one of some degree of confusion and discomfort. It is definitely a strange new world in which many, or most, of the standard guidelines, procedures and processes of group or organizational function are suspended. Most obviously there is no Leader or leading group with a plan of action which he/she or they will manage. Indeed there is no Plan in the normal sense of that word, just a focal theme and few basic principles. Truth to tell, nobody has any idea of precisely what will happen, when it might start, or where it will go. And that includes the facilitator, who generally will have less idea of likely occurrences and potential outcomes than the participants, if only because he or she is usually a stranger to the group and unaware of “usual behaviors.”

When asked, participants will describe their initial experience with words such as “odd,” “counter-intuitive,” “disorienting,” – up to “crazy” and stronger. I am sure that somebody would have said “asymmetrical,” had the word had currency at that time. Several years ago I used to ask participants at the beginning to estimate their level of confidence for something like a “successful outcome” (undefined) by picking a number 1-10. 1 = a disaster and 10 = a raging success. The numbers were always low, and sometimes in minus quantities.

I have never queried diplomats, generals and others concerned about the asymmetry of things, but judging from their writings, the feelings of the moment are at least analogous, if not identical. Strange new world, and not going according to plan! But there is a significant difference between the two groups.

For the generals and diplomats (and we might also include corporate executives and the like) the discomfort of asymmetry appears to be an ongoing affair. For the OST participants, the adjustment to the “strange new world” happens virtually instantaneously. Within an hour of start, everybody is usually hard at work, and whatever discomfort they may have felt disappears, overcome by the activity of productive business. I can’t say that all anxiety has gone, but clearly the people are too busy to notice. And for whatever it is worth, precisely the same sort of thing



happens when the participants are generals, diplomats and senior executives. Also of note is that by the end of the OST event, the same people, skeptics and doubters as well, typically note their increased comfort and their surprise of the level of productivity (“It’s magic!”). Some will even sound almost rhapsodic, talking about how comfortable they feel, how natural. It is not uncommon for people to say that they feel like they, “Have come home.” Such comments appear even (and perhaps most especially) when the subject under discussion is massively complex and hugely conflicted.

Proof may be too strong word, but I think it may be justified. 25 years and multiple iterations of OST proves to my satisfaction that people, all sorts of people, can effectively operate in an asymmetric environment and quickly learn how to intuit the flow and use that flow for their purposes and advantage. The fact that they can do all of this virtually instantaneously, without extensive training and preparation, suggests that the essential skills and knowledge are already present, albeit not recognized or effectively utilized. This should be good news for all those afflicted by an asymmetric world. However, this news will not easily change a deeply held, fundamental perception of reality. Moving from a current position which sees basic order perturbed by troublesome elements of asymmetry to one where everything is asymmetrical is a large leap. And it is a leap that can never be accomplished by logical argument, I think. But it can and does take place with experience. There is an old saw to the effect that, “Experience is the best teacher.” In this case, I think it may be the only teacher. This does not make OST the “saving grace” – but I believe it can be a useful place to start.

The real impact of OST, I believe, is as a pointer to possible futures. It is probably true that the world could be a better place if we would “open space” in every moment and corner. But that is not the only, or even the best possibility. Actually I think Open Space Technology is only a halfway technology. I am sure we can do better if we were to follow our noses and build upon our experience. This would not mean improving the process which, if I am correct, has already been fine tuned over the course of 13.7 billion years. But I am sure that we can improve our understanding of that process as well as our skills in terms of more effective collaboration with the power of self organization.

For example in conversations with a friend and colleague who was in Egypt during the Tahrir Square events conducting Open Space gatherings on the periphery, she described how many of the behaviors and experiences of the standard OST were also to be observed in the Square. People met in circles which formed and reformed as the subject and personal changed. Nobody scripted it, and definitely did not control or manage what transpired. But it worked. Strangers

met, deep conversations occurred, people treated each other with respect. There was a sense of joy, even fun. Was it all just the euphoria of revolution or something more?

Another colleague who found herself in the midst of Tiananmen Square noted similar behaviors – people in circles, meeting each other with respect, deeply engaged in new and different conversations. Same question – Was it all just the euphoria of revolution or something more? I suspect the answer in both situations is – Both.

We are all aware of the euphoria that breaks out during revolutionary moments. We are also aware that it is typically and tragically short lived. But here is where the “more” comes in. Just suppose that the revolutionary euphoria was also a natural occurrence of what we consistently see in Open Space. And if so, could we learn to ride the waves and sustain the outcomes? We have learned to do something of the sort in narrow confines of an Open Space gathering and what comes after. Could that learning have broader application? Truthfully I don’t have a clue, but the prospect is intriguing and certainly could prove to be a powerful antidote to what I might call, “The Asymmetric Blues.”

So here’s the invitation...at long last. Following these notions, dreams, or possibilities will consume lifetimes – amounts of time and energy I simply do not have. 75 may not be the end of the road, but you definitely get a glimmer of it from here. If I have a hope for whatever legacy I may have created, it is that you, whoever you may be, will feel called upon to journey down the trail a bit. You are invited...