

Adjacent opportunities (10.2)

Still more chutzpah

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Last year I wrote a column about the notion of Applied Chutzpah—a willingness to step forward into audacious action even though one may have no idea how one will either pull it off, or where it will ultimately lead. The only real knowing at the moment of Applied Chutzpah is an intuition that if some audacious action were not initiated, nothing would get done.

Since putting those ideas to paper, and continuing to live by its impudent premise, I have been delivered to precipices of torturing ambiguity (I must say, teetering on the edge of bottomless uncertainty is a terrifying place to hang out), perilously dangled at the end of my financial rope over great voids of indifference, (it's amazing what a bank run can do to one's fundraising efforts), and patted and praised with more empty-handed "attaboys" than if I had cured and eliminated Bush league syndrome (an affliction that finally leaves after eight years, but ultimately takes ages for the system to rid itself of the infection).

Boy, my applied chutzpah sure showed them. But rather than wallowing in a vat of samasarcic self-pity, (I'm told it really never ends) I would prefer to look at what has actually emerged from these unrequested and unprovoked interactions that I have now perpetrated on an unsuspecting world scene.

Amazingly, it has engaged chutzpahtic interactions by others! Folks have launched operations in various global locations from Berlin, to Sydney to Rio and across the US, all of them working to help social action organizations get the word out about what they are doing so they can sustain and support the work these organizations bring to their communities. And all of them now are mining the possible for the resonant themes that will engage still others.

Bill Shore, founder of Share our Strength, wrote a remarkable book called *The Cathedral Within*. As a Buddhist student, I must admit I see cathedrals as vain attempts at establishing towering permanence. But Shore doesn't necessarily care what goes on inside the Cathedral. What fascinates him is that people dedicate centuries of work to complete them. It is the labor effort that is transcendent. It's kind of like the argument between art and artifact. Nonetheless, as a Cathedral builder, one's eye is on a different perspective than the final outcome. It's going to take five centuries to build the damn thing. Still, one's lifework in building 1/50th of a level of the cathedral is neither insignificant to the structural integrity of the whole nor to what its final completion may inspire in others. The Applied Chutzpah moment is laying the first and/or 5000th stone and knowing that however the structure eventually looks when it is done something has been set in motion by audacious actions that all along the way, will transform the lives of those that interact with it.

Our society doesn't always understand the idea of "bit by bit." It wants only to deal in wholes and wholly accomplished things. Only the *finished*, solid thing counts, not its thinginess, how it got to its final thing-state. It may seem odd, but impermanence has no problem with things that take hundreds of years to complete. Impermanence is simply an acknowledgement of moment to moment change: That who we are in this moment is not who we are in the next. For those of us who work in the arena of complexity and emergence, this simple notion is our bread and butter. Developing the patience and understanding to realize that the results and outcomes of the "cathedrals" we're building do not all reside in the project's ultimate completion, is actually a deeper understanding of impermanence and emergence than the notion that what we're building is only alive when it's completed. Now, tell that to a business client when preparing a list of deliverables.

In our haste for completion and an ambiguity-free zone, we also tend to want things to arrive whole. We often think that emergence arrives fully formed and that, in my opinion, is a mistake. If we have set out our *emergimeters* to detect the appearance of local emergences we may find that if we are only looking for those new things that arrive completely formed or informed, we are missing the real power of emergence. An emergent event doesn't come with trumpets blaring and borne on the backs of white horses. At least I've never seen something new arrive like that. It is both in the weak signals and/or the partial signals that emerge that we have the greatest opportunity to truly build something that can shift intransigence. But we have to be able to trust that we can build on that weak or partial signal and it will ultimately manifest a cathedral.

This is the place of Applied Chutzpah. Acting on the emergence of a weak signal is an audacious act. It doesn't always take into account that one might be wrong or fail. That only matters when we get stuck in the belief that we are creating something whose sole value is in its completion. If we're really trying to make a difference, which may be an act more closely associated with foolishness than audacity, we have to be willing to see that the adjacent opportunities that emerge from our activity may not fully form into a something for centuries. And that being the brave builders, confident enough to face the perils of ambiguity and indifference, we find that what might emerge from this casual chain is something that will inspire others to act, as well. And then as they say, shift happens.