Adjacent opportunities (10.3)

Social change, complexity and social entrepreneurs

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Ron Schultz


Social Change begins as an individual undertaking. Within our understanding of emergence, it could be no other way. The “I” must change before the “We” can successfully interact and afford an emergent change. There is no “US” changing “THEM.” There is “I” changing and “We” interacting from that changed perspective. What emerges from that is an adjacent opportunity to move forward, to let go, and when necessary, to forgive. These are not the only possibilities, but when taken, these steps fertilize the ground so that inspiration and action can be seeded and grow. That act then engages the growth and participation of still others, and what began as an individual change in thinking, can lead to a social movement of monumental proportions.

With that in mind, we gathered at Adelphi University this spring to further the emergent process seeded by both the social entrepreneurial community and those who have spent a similar amount of time looking into the world of complex adaptive systems. It certainly made sense on paper, and the good news is, it made a lot of sense in person, too. While there were certainly areas where both perspectives had to learn new ideas, it became evident early on that the concepts being shared were wholly aligned.

As one who has his feet planted in both of these camps, my responsibility was to be a bridge-builder. An easy assignment when there is an agreed-upon desire to meet and the energy emerging from the interchange is high. It is this notion of meeting that Irene de Castillejo describes in her book, Knowing Woman, as being so essential for vital and energizing interactions to take place in any context: “We are only exhausted when talking to other people if we do not meet them, when one or both of us are hiding behind screens. On the rare occasion when we are fortunate enough to meet someone, there is no question of fatigue. Both are refreshed because something has happened. It is as though a door had opened, and life suddenly takes on new meaning.”

Doors were flying open all around our Adelphi meeting rooms. New interactions spawned new and deeper connections, and new opportunities flourished. That was certainly my experience. Of course, as a featured speaker, I had an advantage, perhaps, over some. People were more willing to approach me and find a place where something could happen. And it is also true that over the past few years, this column, in particular, has focused on that meeting place of complexity and social entrepreneurs. So when Jeff, Jim and Joyce asked me to participate, I was ready for the meeting and for something new and emergent to happen.

This is the call to action that is now echoing across the United States. It is the call to make something happen that will improve the world we encounter. There has also been a great deal of talk about the need for change coming out of our political discourse. Each side has staked out its own ground and proclaimed its rightful place on either side of the bridge. We hear calls from both sides saying “we can find non-partisan ways of working together as long as you agree with my point of view.” Few are surprised that there is no real meeting taking place, in spite of the rhetoric. It’s not really wanted, and so no real change will emerge from this antagonism and resentment.

The question, of course, is not that change needs to take place, which is the extent of the political discourse, but a more clear understanding of how change happens. What then is the meeting that must take place out of which real cultural change can emerge?

For me, the discourse at the Adelphi conference gave rise to an appropriate level of thinking that demonstrated not only where change needs to happen, but also the basis for the how of cultural change. What drives change is our sense of loss or injustice. We come to the threshold of change once we are willing to forgive and/or let go. Without this element in the meeting process, where the connection to the “WE” lives and real change happens, we build a bridge to nowhere. This is why the political discourse ends at the threshold. We have become unable to forgive or let go of our hard-pressed and cherished beliefs that we have the most righteous stand. When righteousness and solidity of thought prevails, there can be no change.

Once we are able to forgive and let go of that righteousness, real inspiration can emerge and action can begin to take root. As that action becomes evident, it begins to attract others and meeting, collaboration and partnerships can be formed. However, it is imperative to understand that the key to any movement of change is our ability to say “no” to as few as possible. So many cultural change movements exclude when they should include. It is within the complex meeting and interactions of those involved in the movement that what emerges is greater than the sum of the parts. We know this. It is what the conference on Complexity and Social Entrepreneurship at Adelphi was all about. Now, we have to begin looking to include more, to broaden the bridge so that more people can find a place of meeting, and greater cultural change can be allowed to happen.

Movements do not grow by excluding one another, they grow the more we say yes to one another, even when it means we have to learn to forgive and let go of the rightness we feel we own. Without that ability to cross the threshold of change, inspiration
cannot emerge, and there can be no effective or successful social change to follow.

The conference on Complexity and Social Entrepreneurship was a great start. Congratulations to Jeff Goldstein, Jim Hazy, and Joyce Silberstang for their hard work. I look forward to an even larger event next year as the movement gains even greater momentum.