Adjacent opportunities (13.3)

Present possible, adjacent possible, possibly possible

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Everything feels so intransient now, so solid, so desperate. The possibility for change not only feels like a distant possibility, it feels like things might never change. Is it possible to make it different? Are we stuck with the social ills plaguing us? While the options available and presented in this journal are often well-reasoned, highly intelligent and breathlessly notated, the solution I am about to provide here, may be one you couldn’t imagine finding in an academic periodical. But then, it might just be that failure of imagination that is the key to the strong box of our stuck-ness. Shifting intransient thinking and taking new action about the social issues we find so frozen in place (the job, by the way of the social entrepreneurs in our midst), is not necessarily about the solidity of our thinking, but perhaps rather the encasement of our hearts. Let me offer this scenario that is not as crazy and touchy-feely as it might sound. So all you hardcore thinkers, let it go for just a moment. You’ll feel more comfortable in a minute.

I open my heart to the world because it is possible, now. An adjacent possibility emerges for me to interact with another and share my open heart and their heart opens, too. And then, as we continue to interact with our open hearts toward others, it becomes possibly possible to open the hearts of billions around the world.

In this current world seemingly so filled with intolerance and aggression, something needs to be done to melt the solidity that characterizes our intransigent positions. In 1997, I co-wrote a book with the late and brilliant, Howard Sherman, called Open Boundaries. In it, I offered a model called A Sustainable Model for Inconceivable Development that was all about what was presently possible, shifting the adjacent possible, and bringing about the possibly possible.

Shortly after that book was published by Perseus Books, and with an appropriate amount of audacity, I sent a copy to our then US Secretary of Energy, and my former Congressman, Bill Richardson. I asked him to forward a second copy of Open Boundaries I had included, with the Sustainable Model for Inconceivable Development duly highlighted, to former Senator George Mitchell who was about to negotiate a peace settlement in Northern Ireland. Secretary Richardson, later Governor of New Mexico, wrote back to me that he had done as I had asked. Bill really is a good guy.

Now, I am not so audacious as to suggest that Senator Mitchell read the highlighted portion of the book he had received and employed my Sustainable Model for Inconceivable Development to find peace in Northern Ireland, but the possibility is possible, and there is no arguing with the fact that peace was attained. So, the only logical conclusion I, and possibly we, can ascertain from this is that it is possible to shift and melt the solidity of those things we have become so adept at creating and encasing.

So it begins. Open your heart, share your open heart with another, and together we can shift the world. Afraid to open your heart? Perhaps you think it’s safer to live in a dangerous world filled with fear and hatred? Terrified by what might happen if you opened your heart and you were rejected? Well those are all good reasons for continuing our lemming-led march over the cliff to our self-destruction, aren’t they? “I had to let our demise happen because I was afraid that by opening my heart to the world I might be laughed at, ridiculed, or worse yet, rejected by someone unable to open theirs.”

Well, have no fear, SMID is here (OK, I won’t use this acronym again)—and yes, it is an intellectual model that will take you step by step to a more open heart, and who knows, possibly peace in our lifetime.

When emergence happens, and we realize that things are not the same as we had previously thought, we are, in essence, changing our understanding of our system and the models we have devised to describe that system. It means that if we really want to realize change, we must adjust our behaviors and relationships according to our new understanding as well as the rules we have created to maintain that understanding of our system. So The Sustainable Model for Inconceivable Development starts by:

**Step 1:** Adjusting our models on the basis of the new understanding that has emerged.

**Step 2:** Adjust our relationships, our behavior and rules, according to our new understanding of our model.

**Step 3:** When we do this something new emerges, because something different always happens whenever there is an interaction between our models and behaviors, once we have taken the first two steps.

**Step 4:** Return to Step 1—go back and readjust our models on the basis of this new emergence.

**Step 5:** Return to Step 2—adjust our relationships on the basis of our new model.
Emergence: Complexity and Organization

Step 1: I am introduced to a fellow at a coffee shop where I am a regular. He is about 180 degrees opposite from me in political, social and religious beliefs—OK we’ll call this person a Republican. If I meet him as one of them, with all my preconceived notions of who they are, nothing changes and the world remains solid. However, if I meet him and I decide to open my heart to him, and in our conversation I find that even though his beliefs are completely differently from mine, he doesn’t like seeing homeless people suffering on the streets, I hear something we share in common, and my feeling about this person shifts slightly.

Step 2: I go out on my day, but I begin adjusting my opinion about him and how he shows up in the world.

Step 3: The next day we meet again at the coffee store, and I ask him what he thinks he could do to help a homeless person rather than just give them food or money? The response is, “Well, we could give them a job.” Suddenly, we’re talking about my world. We sit down with our coffee, and begin talking about what giving “them” a job looks like and what if it weren’t a job, but what would it look like if we helped people in this population start businesses—what would that entail? Suddenly, on the napkin in front of us, a plan starts to form.

Step 4: I head off for work, and I’m thinking, “What was that?” My thinking about this person begins to shift again as possibilities start to emerge.

Step 5: The next day over coffee, he has already found a table for us, and the first question about my family is asked and I ask about his. We both have girls. We laugh. Both hearts open a little further.

Step 6: We look back at our ideas from the day before, but there’s an enthusiasm about them now that feels different. It’s just notes on a napkin, but we agree that a curriculum that teaches basic business tenants would be required and teaching it couldn’t be rushed—we would need mentors to work with each person to help them in areas in which they had no experience. I mention a business professor I know who could help.

Step 7: A good part of the rest of my day is thinking about this other person who has suddenly taken up my mornings and with whom, we seem to be doing… I’m not sure what, but we are doing. The beliefs that are held by us about the world are not important to this or to us doing this together.

Step 8: The next morning we have both invited others to join us. My business professor friend is there as is the head of his church’s outreach group, with whom my colleague is friends.

Step 9: A population of homeless people with whom, it turns out, the university and the church have been working is identified. The professor can bring in some students to act as mentors and the church offers its community room to hold classes to begin a joint homeless entrepreneurs’ education program. There is great enthusiasm and joy. We all shake hands, laugh and embrace with hearts open at what is possible before us.

Step 10: The process continues and within a month, the first population of homeless entrepreneurs begins their training. And the process continues...

When adjustments are made after each emergent possibility arises, what we see after the second or third level of emergence is a development that would have been absolutely inconceivable from the perspective of our initial understanding. Our tendency, however, is to stop the process after the first or second level of emergence and close the system back down to protect the initial, fabulous innovation that has come about.

The key to sustaining the development process is the continual adjustment of our models, behaviors and the rules we establish to guide them—our relationships. As soon as we freeze the model, and, subsequently, our relationship to our behaviors, we return to orthodox novelty—the same stickiness with which we began. Emergent novelty—real innovation—is possible only when the system is open to what is presently possible and adjacently possible. And then it is in the realm of the possibly possible that what was once inconceivable becomes actualized and we can have peace in Northern Ireland... or perhaps Democrats and Republicans working together.

When we fear there isn’t time to allow complex interactions and emergence to happen, we need to address more closely the work unleashed by the previous emergence and the rules we have created to support our models. What has previously emerged fertilizes the ground for the next emergence that will invariably arise, but if we are still holding onto old rules that no longer support what has emerged, there is no room for change and we once again solidify where we are and refuse to do...
OK, now let's get back to the heart of the matter, here. When all our lives are being adversely affected by the intransigence we impose when we close our minds to what is possible, doesn't it make sense to change that and start opening our hearts? The love and compassion we create as human beings is not insignificant when addressing the issues surrounding us. There is a modern example of this that took place in South Africa. Had the majority population been prompted to act against the oppressors who had defiled them for decades, there would have been a bloodbath like few the world had seen. But they did not. Led by Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, they chose to come from the heart, and provided the world with a novel new model, truth and forgiveness (reconciliation). Their decision to come from their hearts rather than unleash the ravages of hatred was one of the greatest events of the 20th century. It was an example for the 21st century of what can emerge when the heart is chosen over the intransigence of how things are normally done. The new leaders of South Africa recognized this novel emergent possibility before them and then took the steps necessary to assure their countrymen not to embed themselves so solidly in their old models that they sank everything rather than do something that could benefit everyone. It took courage and leadership—but then as I have said in this column before "courage" comes from the French courage—coming from the heart. They shattered the model, adjusted their behaviors and rules accordingly and what emerged was something that was inconceivable in the eyes of the world.

It can happen. We're just one step away from that adjacent possibility. I say, let's open our hearts and take it!