

[Adjacent opportunities \(8.1\)](#)

The dancing wave warrior

March 31, 2006 · [Column](#)

[Ron Schultz](#)

Schultz R. Adjacent opportunities (8.1): The dancing wave warrior. Emergence: Complexity and Organization. 2006 Mar 31 [last modified: 2016 Nov 26]. Edition 1. doi: 10.emerg/10.17357.f1a3ce136bf0006927e52b3a2581e2ad.

The swell rises behind him, lifting him gently as he sits astride his surfboard in the cool dawn of a La Jolla, California morning, bobbing beyond the banks of Windandsea Beach. The Sun's first light rides along the edges of a brightening California cloudless blue sky etched with streaks of foamy contrail. It's a moment without thought, without analysis, without control. The dance between wave warrior and wave awaits the right moment, the right combination of gravity and pull, the right mixture of distant storm and prevailing winds. Then it's the paddling, the lifting, the pure exhilaration, the emergence, the diving-out, as emerge's root form describes it, riding along the crest of the wave carried aloft by the profound and the mundane forces of the powerful ocean.

Charting trajectories across wave patterns is what Patrick Crampton has done since he was a ten year old, mat-surfing the lower California beaches that stretch from Ocean Beach north to Swami's in Encinitas. Years later, as a student at the University of California at San Diego, Crampton had to decide if he were going to become a bio-chemical physicist or a chemo-bio-physicist, or a physical chemical biologist, and he opted for surfer instead. It may seem to be an odd choice, but wave structures are alluring and very complex. When he had to make his choice, what ultimately emerged for Crampton was that none of the opportunities available to him gave him what he wanted. Before leaving academia, he opted to take his Ph.D in Philosophy instead of chemical bio-mechanics. It didn't really surprise his colleagues. He had gained a reputation as something of a free spirit, not as absorbed as they were in the minutia of things. The school was a bit more reluctant to OK such a change in course and direction, but eventually ceded to the notion of his post-graduate work in things philosophical. That is, of course, if he promised to play by their rules and follow their course of action for him.

By this point in time, Crampton had been surfing for a dozen years. He was used to the intimate and unimpeded relationship he had with the ocean. The only rules he had to follow while riding a wave were the ones that protected the lives of the other surfers around him. He weighed that freedom of thought and expression against the school's desire for academic control and what emerged was an adjacent opportunity to have none of it. He figured he could ponder and conjecture about wave structures and their effect on the related human experience and add to our understanding of more minutia, or he could lay on his surfboard along the Pacific Rim and transport himself far away from the theories burbling without end in his mind. He decided against a doctorate in philosophy and its bounded rules and chose instead a life at the wave's edge — where for him courage, integrity and freedom lie. And at 59, he is still the dancing wave warrior.

In his remarkable book, *Stoked! A History of Surf Culture* (ISBN 1586852132), Drew Kampion describes this interplay of surfer and surf by saying "Everything in the material world manifests itself in waves, but while the dynamics of waves modulate all phases of our existence, no where is this fact more graphically apparent than when man goes to sea." This is the complex interaction of human systems and the rhythms of nature. As a practical scientist, how then could Crampton possibly avoid the opportunity to apply and actually live his science instead of merely studying it? He became what he always wanted to become – a wave experimentalist.

The notion of Adjacent Opportunities is as complex as the interactions out of which they emerge. We tend to

value the choice of one of these adjacent opportunities based on concerns such as economy or promotion and advancement, but they operate on a much more dynamic, personal and developmental level as well. Crampton talks about a series phase transition from the time he arrives at the beach with his surfboard and changes into his wet suit, to being carried off along the edge of the waves to the time he re-emerges back on the beach. Not only is the shift physical during these transitions, but his psychology becomes rearranged. The interaction of wave and being-ness produces an entirely different space where time and internal mind-filled-ness cease, and mindfulness emerges — a place where the mind is once again receptive because it has space to be so.

If that's not a degree in advanced philosophy, than something is missing from our physic, if you will. We tend to relocate surfers into the column usually prefaced by "fer sure, dude." We categorize it as a sport, in which physical prowess is elevated above meaning and insight. And those who know better endure the insult as they circumscribe the tangent of a wave, with the ease and fluid grace of the artistry they perform. The experience takes people like Patrick Crampton and his surfing buds out of the headspace in which so many of us remain stuck. They share an experiential understanding of the relationship of human and planet about which those of us locked in our classrooms and in our offices can only conjecture.

So as we marvel at the athleticism and beauty of the surfer gliding along the crest of a wave, as we recoil from the high wave wipeout, fantasize about the complex interaction of man, board and water and what might emerge, Crampton is living the interaction. He encounters and engages the world of the adjacent opportunity each time his board touches the water. And for him, the life of trying to recreate the experience in a lab shares nothing with what emerges as he does his dance with the great mother wave. And that's "Fer sure, Dude."