

# **The History of the Institute of Cultural Affairs in Chicago**

**From 1984 to 1992**

**An 8 year journey of transformation**

**Written by Jim Troxel, June 1992**

Note:

This project was performed as part of my graduate studies at DePaul University towards my Master's in Organizational Transformation. My premise is that personal change models can be used also to view change inside organizations. The ICA in Chicago, where I was based at the time, served as the guinea pig for my exploration.

I used two basic screens or lens to write this history. One is the "Hero Journey" made famous by Joseph Campbell. Here I used the four master phase themes of:

1. The Call: 1984 - 1986
2. The Trials: 1986 - 1988
3. The Union: 1988 - 1990
4. The Return: 1990 - 1992

The other lens was the "Other World" motif, with the same two-year time periods of:

1. The Land of Mystery
2. The River of Consciousness
3. The Sea of Tranquility
4. The Mountain of Care

While I am writing about what a group of people were experiencing in this 8 year time frame, it is a personal reflection and it is possible that no other person who lived this same experience will recognize what I am writing about.

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## THE JOURNEY OF THE CHICAGO ICA STAFF FROM 1984 TILL 1992 "A MYTHIC TALE"

a story of eight years in Chicago  
through the lens of the Hero Journey

by Jim Troxel

### THE CALL: 1984 - 1986

"What is he talking about?" "What is he doing?" That's all I could think of when Slicker - one of the senior staff members - went up front to give a talk about "spirit methods." We had just successfully completed the most ambitious international program of our lives, the IERD -International Exposition of Rural Development. We had the world in our hip pocket. We had a great frame of international advisors and supporters. We had local people around the world singing our praises. We were on a high. Now, here HE was; talking about animalism and stuff like that. Why, Slicker, you've just spent the last several years in rural India and Kenya; don't you know better than anyone that we are ready to make our big move? What are you talking about spirit methods saying that the only way we can replicate our successful village development and the new volunteers is by dealing with this spiritual stuff? Are you absolutely out of your mind?

Or, did I miss some meeting, some workshop, some major announcement, where we all decided to go crazy? Probably did. I'd been over in Fifth City on the Westside building the Auto Center that I had missed a lot lately. So maybe I was the crazy one in the bunch. Everyone else seemed to resonate (I didn't even know that word before) with him; sort of, at least.

There were some other signals, too, now that I look back. The staff went from Delhi, the site of the IERD, down to Jaipur to reflect and to set out what needs to be done between now and the big "Year of Order Council." People were talking about a lot of strange things. But it seemed to me the task was pretty clear - let's get each location talking, doing workshops and common themes so that some "talking papers" could be written and circulated in time for July. This would give us a head start on the kind of thinking we needed to do in such a short time frame we set for ourselves. So I was in a group that mapped out an innovative approach for this to be done. But, in retrospect, there was a funny feeling about that meeting which to this day I still can't put my mind around it, except for my strong reaction to Slicker's talk.

Was I hearing a call but refusing it? I don't know, for sure. I was hearing something, but it was more like I didn't understand what it was I was hearing. Clearly something new was in the air, but I couldn't put my finger on it.

An early signal that the summer council was going to be different was the experience of a group we set aside to design the procedures for it; they were called the "Continuum." They consisted of representatives of our varied locations and were charged with coming up with the design, format and overall plan for the council. They convened in early April and stayed pretty much cloistered in their own meeting room most of the time at our Chicago office. In fact, when we hosted the US National Steering Committee for the IERD to talk about our future, none of the members of the Continuum participated. I would have thought this would have been an excellent opportunity to hear what our constituency was saying about where they felt the ICA should be headed, but the group stayed away even after special invitations were sent to them to send representatives. There was a lot of rumor about what this group was doing so secreted away. Strange rituals and spiritual exercises were mentioned; a lot of heady talk about polity and so forth but nothing one could put their hands on, at least, not from my perspective.



When the Council began that summer it consisted of two parts: the first was sort of a series of external encounters on different themes helping us to sensitize ourselves to the world, and the second was more internally focused on how we would respond to the times. We knew already that 1984 was a pivot point for us if for no other reason than the symbolism of it. We tend to operate with 4 and 8 year motifs and the theme that had carried us from 1976 to 1984 had come to an end and it would be time to envision the next 8 if not 16 years. Much preparation went into planning it; most of the ICA staff from around the world would be expected to attend the meeting slated for Chicago. I recall with some humor about how we made special toilets for our Asian colleagues to use to make them feel at home; it was an attempt at being sensitive to our multi-cultural composition, but it came off as a token gesture.

I was still being pulled by my Fifth City responsibilities somewhat, so I could not give the Council my undivided attention. I tried to make the two weeks available as best I could. I remember going over for the first day or two and sitting through some really queer, to my opinion, meditative exercises, the most queer being the walking meditation. It was interesting but frankly pointless. But most of all, each day was started out in small group exercises rather than the total group participating in a common ritual. This was a real shocker to me, because here to fore we all started the day out together all doing the same morning ritual. What was explained was that each group was doing the same thing, but in order to lessen the differences and ease newer people into it, these were practiced in the small group environment, making it easier for our many international colleagues to be apart. Well, most never did and the whole point was lost, at least to me it was. I sort of thought, in a way, this approach said tons about what was happening to us. We no longer were able to be one group in ritualizing together a common story about who we are and what we care called to be - the purpose of a ritual. I got the impression we simply avoided it because it was much too impossible given all the cultural differences we had now come to represent. True, but if we could have broken through on this, we would really be on the leading edge of forming a truly global group. Had we denied our calling; refused the challenge? Or, were we in fact being sensitive to the particular needs of the diverse community we had come to be?

For myself, I retreated from the challenge of having to come to terms with this new reality. I simply explained to myself that Fifth City needed me more right now and that was where I could make the best contribution. A simple cop-out justified with a reliable excuse that few challenged because everyone knew what a heroic job I had been doing and therefore needed to be continuing.

Once the Council started I noticed that my wife was recruited to join the "procedures team." I thought this particularly strange - not that she couldn't do it - but that I thought the Continuum was going to do that; after all, hadn't they been working on this for several months? There was some continuity, but not much. Where had this leadership group disappeared to, I asked and got mostly blank stares. Clearly, something strange was happening and no one seemed to have a handle on it.

As I said there were some great things to come out of the Council. One was that each one of us was subjected to a medical examination by our own team of doctors and nurses who were a part of our staff. We had done very little in the arena of taking care of ourselves and this was a major exercise of corporate care. In fact, the health care of our group - along with diet concerns and other diseases - became one the sub-themes to the whole notion of putting ourselves in the position for the "long haul." Heretofore our operating image had been sort of a revolutionary roman candle that would burn itself out after our mission was complete sometime around 2007 or something like that. Now, we were attempting to see ourselves as a group that would be around for a while and that each one of us would be around awhile, too. So, taking care of ourselves for the long term became one of the victories of the summer.

Toward the end of the Council things began to come down to "crunch time." As with any group, the economics and the polity issues have to be dealt with and in this case it wasn't clear how they were shaping up. The motif of "decentralization" or "regionalization" had found a high degree of currency



within the deliberations. The category of "primary unit" entered into our vocabulary as the operating modality of our organization. A primary unit would have a high degree of autonomy over its own financing and assignments process. We'd decrease the attention we had previously given to highly fluid exchange of money and personnel around the world in place of more local control. There was a lot of philosophical resonance with this notion but because it took so long for this idea to become accepted as such it got real late in the game no one had really thought through all the practical implications and things became quite rushed toward the end of the Council. Clearly a lot of details had not been worked through. So the air was filled with anticipation on the one hand and anxiety on the other.

It came time for the closing ceremony to take place where the assignments are made and the new "primary units" would be commissioned. We hit a brick wall of sorts. To this day I do not know the details, because in a way the issue was only symptomatic of the larger confusion. Essentially, as I recall, we could not work out the assignments to the "Manila Primary Unit." And as the entire assembly waited, a small group was set aside to work this snag out. Well, as best I can tell, the snag didn't ever get worked out. We somehow finished with the ceremony, about 6 hours after it was planned, but there was a heavy air of uneasiness across the group. We were embarking upon our next 4 and 8 years without everyone on the same page. Things were real unsettled in people's minds and hearts.

A month or two later, when it came time for the "Chicago Primary Unit" to begin to define itself through frequent weekend meetings comprised of our locations across the Midwest Heartland of the US, the unsettledness did not disappear; in fact it increased. No one really knew what we were doing nor even trying to do. Presumably we had been set free to create our own destiny, but this was so complicated by our having to carry the baggage of the past and the difference amongst ourselves as to what this new experiment was to convey, these weekend sessions became a spiritual drag. Generally starting on an upbeat note, they quickly dragged in a mire of confusion and complexity that no one really could get their mind around.

We were in a brand new world, but no one had a map.

Several people - not just in Chicago - took this moment of confusion to make their own personal declarations about their vocational intent. And starting from this point on, many staff began to fall away, some using the exigency of the decentralization as their justification; i.e., since we're on our own, this is what I am doing, even if no one could recognize it as "ICA work." The disorientation over this point, only compounded the chaos. Decentralization came to mean each one deciding out of their sense of what was necessary using their stored up reservoir of ICA skills, forging out their own particular brand of missional service to the world. And in most cases, these sentinels survey the new terrain for us and pioneered in some very innovative and important engagements. In fact, this sort of thing had already been underway - the decentralization, it could be said, simply was a way to catch up with the indicative reality.

We had been called out - individually and collectively - to live in a new reality that no one of us completely understood and many - like myself - in a general sense refusing to claim its promise. Oh, yes, I knew things needed to be changed; but there was a vague feeling that we might be throwing the baby out with the bath water. What was the essence of what we are that needed to be preserved so that our corporate gift to history would be made manifest? How were we going to maintain a sense of global glue to bind ourselves and our experiences together around the world? What does "relational autonomy" look like?

We sent out scouts into this new world. For example, a representative of each Primary Unit had a short mid-course correction meeting in Hong Kong about a year after our launch. When one of our representatives came back it was like he was speaking in tongues; he had been to the Tower of Babel



and no one understood a word he said, and everything he said we needed to be doing, we rejected, not because we didn't agree with him, but primarily because we couldn't understand him.

One source of comfort came from an unlikely source about a year into this experience. Marty Seldman had encountered us in Florida years earlier. Marty is a professional psychologist who has his own consulting business in which he has adopted many of the ICA's participative methods. He was invited to visit us in Chicago and by the time our experience was over with him, he had spent numerous times with us in Chicago and around the US. He eventually attended another mid-quadrennial meeting held in Bilbao, Spain.

Marty was such a believer in our methods that he called us on the carpet for not doing more to get them into the public domain. He constantly preached to us about the need to organize ourselves in such a fashion so as to see ourselves marketing and delivering our unique group process techniques. He spent hours training us in marketing and counselor selling methods. He shared with us a social style inventory form that he uses in his own consulting practice. He literally called us out of our tomb and attempted to empower us with new images of how we could function and operate to maximize our individual and collective talents. He was like standing at the threshold beckoning us to come forward.

Marty gave us courage, if nothing else. With his encouragement we intensified our marketing efforts. We finally launched the book writing project to write down finally our knowledge of consensus building and team planning.

There were others during this time who also urged us on. Joseph Van Arendonk of the UN, Jean Houston, and Willis Harman, just to name a few. People who were watchers and observers of our work in this time period of 1984 - 1986 kept telling us how great we were and to not lose sight of our uniqueness. It was these guardians of our faith who kept us on a rightful path of service even while our internal structures and psyches withstood incredible pressure to give in. We continued on into a land we still did not recognize. It was verily the Land of Mystery.

### **THE TRIALS: 1986 - 1988**

The Bilbao meeting was a significant threshold crossing for us. In late summer of 1986 meeting in Spain, again representatives of our various units met to examine the transformation underway. Here the last vestiges of the old structures were dealt their death blow. No more centrums to bind us together. Yes, a heavy expense and overhead, but would we regret it? As a sort of transition piece, we put into place three "break-through teams" to guide certain global functions: research, international development and long-term investments. These "in but not of their primary units" teams would play a major role later.

We also decided to move the home base of the Panchayat - our globally-designated symbolic leadership team - to Hong Kong, the first time out of Chicago since their inception. Also, the "student house," a long term Chicago fixture, was to be in residence in Seattle.

Bilbao put the finishing touches to "decentralization." Chicago would never be the same. It would no longer be the center. With the exception of the Long Term Investment Break-Through team being located in our midst, we would be just like everyone else. Corresponding with this, we had come to the end of our residential consultancy to the Fifth City project and at about this same time, our staff from there were relocated back into our single facility in Chicago, the Kemper Building, our family included.

The Kemper Building - so named because it was given to us by the Kemper Insurance Co. - had large symbolic importance to us. It had been fully occupied with ICA functions since we acquired it in 1972. The site of many important events - our summer councils, the funeral of our founder, the home



base of our leadership Panchayat - it was in a way home to all of us wherever we were located. Most American staff used it as their permanent address. It was the only home some of our kids could identify.

In the past with it being the "Motherhouse of our Centrum Bands," we were able to justify retaining a good portion of the unrestricted funds raised from the US, which were all deposited in Chicago. Now with "regionalization" well underway and two other "national depository accounts" established in Phoenix and New York, the question of how to maintain the Kemper building's \$20,000 a month overhead loomed large.

I, in fact, had been assigned to a task force the last few months to examine the building's fate. Should we (could we) sell it? If so, where would we go, what would we do? If we kept it, how would we make it pay for itself? We knew we would have vast spaces available and empty; what would fill the building to make it pay its own way? These were the kind of questions our three person team began to wrestle with.

The decision of our colleagues in Bilbao was very succinct: "Chicago, the Kemper building is all yours. We will let you have this global asset if you can cover about \$600,000 of global debts accrued around the world, so that we can continue the decentralization journey without encumbrances. Everyone would be on equal footing and you would have the Kemper building to leverage your own future." So it was ours for \$600,000.

While the meeting in Bilbao was taking place, our task force was making its final report to the group in Chicago who wrestled with it mightily. Our recommendation - based on market studies, physical examination of the buildings neglect over the years (deferred maintenance) - was to sell it and take the proceeds, pay off the debt and make a down payment on another location. We even had a buyer who had placed 10% of \$1.6 million in escrow waiting for our decision. The group was uncomfortable with our recommendation. In order to assist their imaginations about alternatives as a way of alleviating their obvious anxieties about the future (after all, we're talking about the only home we'd ever had), we designed a workshop to identify the values of the alternative. We identified the specifications we would want in an alternative. There was one problem: we specified the exact same building we had; the group could not imagine being anywhere else.

After much agony the group rejected our task force's recommendation (and the purchase offer) and decided to hang on to the Kemper building and figure out how to make it work. I thought it absurd myself, but part of my rationale I never was able to communicate. I knew we would have a hard time imagining a new future for ourselves as long we stayed within the symbolic confines of the same place we had been for the last 15 plus years. There would too many ghosts in the walls, too many memories in the air. The group, instead, decided to "eat" the Kemper building - lock, stock and barrel. In retrospect, we were swallowed up by the Kemper building and we were in the Belly of the Whale. We would be made new or not in the very pit of our being.

This was to be the most fateful decision - either way - but the one the group made was to mean that our future would be made brand new in the midst of the shadow of the old. Like Truman rehabing the White House from within without any external signs of it being done, we would have to make ourselves new within the boundaries of our past. A tough venture. It would mean, economically, that before we could even talk about missional program and its cost, we would have a \$20,000 a month albatross around our necks. Furthermore, would we be able to continue the journey without a new exterior to freight our internal life? I doubted it, myself. But I was in the minority.

The next two years was full of trials and tribulations. But one thing needs to said now before we go on: what was done with the Kemper Building did make us brand new. Within a period of four years we were able to rent space out to many other non-profit groups in the area playing various social service



functions, including the city itself. Not only were we able to make up the \$20,000 overhead and pay back the \$600,000 "purchase price," we have been able to move on the deferred maintenance issues and provide a "profit center" of sorts for our whole operation. Of course, not without a lot of pain and agony along the way, but now the Kemper building served as a Community Resource Center that has grounded us in a profound way within the community with a remarkable profile. The building, in stead of serving as a motherhouse for our own internal matters, has become a magnet of possibility for the people of need in the community. We turned it "inside out." We made the building instead of a haven for ourselves, a haven for the disposed of the community. It has become a missional asset far beyond our wildest dreams. In fact, until these last few years, the possibility that the Kemper building itself could be a service tool, was never in our imagination. But in the process we had to turn ourselves inside out to realize it.

But first it served as the place where we were chewed up and spit out.

The next step on the road began with our designated leader proclaiming that he would "give us only two years to get our act together." We felt many strains upon our corporate life together as we had known it. We were pulled from all directions in many ways.

Economically the strain for maintaining a pooled income approach to our finances was beginning to show signs of decay. Since our inception we had operated out of a marvelous shared income mechanism that literally has us pooling all our sources of revenue, then provide each family with an equitable stipend, living accommodations, common kitchen privileges. All income, whether individually earned, contributed, fee for services, etc. were in effect put into one account and re-distributed according to need. The system worked because it was built upon a common belief and value system.

However, this system was being challenged by several forces. They included - but not limited to - such things as: the fact that some of our members' parents needed special attention that our system did not have way of accommodating; increasing inflation of living costs while shrinking income meant freezing our stipend level for many years; greater individual need for members' desiring to pursue continuing education with no mechanism to support it, while higher education costs for our children which we did have a means for were escalating in cost beyond our capacity to adequately support them; health care costs especially with an aging membership base.

Frequent meetings of all of our members on financial matters sprinkled our time together for the next two years. Clearly the system was not in balance with the increasing desires of our people to handle the escalation and a multitude of costs. The movement seemed to be in the direction of increased individual control over the use of the funds each one earned. Yet, we had a number of members whose very existence over the years had become dependent upon the group's capacity to have funds. These people presented a severe challenge to the integrity of our group because it questioned the very core of our self-understanding. While founded on the premise that anybody could do anything, there was implicit understanding that if you committed yourself to lifelong service, your economic needs would be cared for. This was showing up to be a rationale for some to not understand that the success of the whole depended upon each one carrying their own weight.

The culmination of these deliberations occurred with an all day Saturday workshop on our financial system that tried to account for every individual and collective financial need with every source of income. All were present because of the need to ensure that everyone understood all of the individual requests - not just a representative few - a device we had used in the past. The meeting lasted until 3 am with a balanced budget and the declaration of a 90 Day Covenant to make it work at the end of which time we would examine where things stood and project the next phase.



In retrospect, this was the like the last Band-Aid on a system that was conceived for a different group understanding of values and life together. Trying to understand that those among us were not bad people because they had special financial needs was difficult when the values of the corporate culture were so sharply defined in a different way. The problem was not the people; the problem was the system. It would take us another 9 months to effectively address the systemic issue that was laid bare before us. Meanwhile, rancor persisted amongst the group. Innuendo and rumor prevailed. Distrust abounded.

Politically, our system of leadership was in disarray. In the past our leadership was designated in a global assignment process. While a team of 7 - 9 individuals were chosen, one husband and wife couple were selected as the "first amongst equals" to convene the sessions of the leadership. This had served us well. However, of late, more and more people wanted access to the decision making process. We had used a consensus-making process in our deliberations for major polity decisions, but what was being called for on the part of many was more input into some of contextualizing dimensions of the process. So, all meetings of our leadership team were open - they always had been, but now there were scheduled in more convenient times for a majority of the people. Furthermore, our leadership team did an excellent job of involving other representational teams to deal with certain polity considerations on behalf of the whole.

But even the most creative device we invented to accommodate greater numbers of people in the polity deliberations, making decisions was still becoming harder and harder. One task force I was a member of involved dealing with the request of a few of our colleagues who desired to attend a special program of adult education over a period of three years and were seeking the time and financial undergirding from the group to enable this to come about. It seemed like a million issues surrounded and converged in this single decision. The equability of all members having access to comparable adult education needs, the selectivity of these few - why them and not some others, the potential impact of their experience and how it could be enfolded into our common memory upon their return, and the announcement by the resident Break-Through team that they thought it so important they were going to send all their members - were just a few of issues surrounding. In the end, after many hours of talking this group, the recommendation of our task force had to be discussed by the whole group all over again. The process was rather painful due partly to a couple of the requesting candidates needing to attend for personal reasons being very adamant. Tears flowed, gauntlets were thrown, resentment bubbled over.

As in the economic realm, people in our group merely wanted more freedom than our present system could tolerate. While the system worked in an era of "locked-step" missional pursuits, in an era of decentralized autonomy, what we had launched for the whole organization was expressing itself at the individual level as well. This was the similar impetus that drove the decentralization movement. However, simply moving the "problem" down a level did not seem to be producing any more effective solutions. At least none that we could detect while in the midst of the transition.

This leads me to the cultural difficulties. We were able to envision for ourselves as a holding image through this time period three parts of what we came to call the "basketball" image of our thinking through what it meant to be a Primary Unit in Chicago. The three parts were: Product Delivery Capacity (PDC), Social Change Agenda, and Corporate Community. We saw these three as sort of levers to release our future. Teams of individuals volunteered to work on them during after hours and weekends.

A lot of enthusiasm and hope was engendered through this process. The PDC team evolved a new way to thinking about our marketing capacities and strengths and launched the writing of a book on our methods which culminated three years later. The Social Change Agenda envisioned ourselves more heavily involved in the reformation of educational structures which is what we are doing today. The Community group, though, had the toughest time, but nonetheless saw ourselves evolving into a model intentional community with an urban ecological concern.



It came time to bring this important work to a head. Our designated leader was to have given the context for the reporting. Hardly before he could get started on his presentation, he was challenged by one member of the group. The leader, frustrated, sat down and did not complete his presentation. Both events were unheard of: a) someone challenging openly the leader; and 2) the leader backing down. The first was unforgivable in our corporate polity, but the second was fatal to it. The key is that no one defended the leader against the challenge; we allowed the challenge to be successful. I, in my relative naiveté, did not realize it at the time, but knew something fundamental was out of whack. Another member of the leadership team finished the opening context and we completed the meeting's task; but, deep down, we knew something was profoundly askew.

The next several months saw the largest exodus of personnel from our body. We were in the pit of despair. Our designated leaders for all practical purposes had quit. We had not turned any significant corner on our economic modeling; our polity processes were rendered totally ineffective; and our corporate culture was dramatically out of synch with the past. There were no clear indicators of our future anywhere to be found.

In fact, in the spring of 1988, just a few months before the next quadrennial gathering to be held in Mexico, every location received a letter from the Panchayat team announcing, in effect, that they were going out of being. There had been in the last several years a lot of discussion about revamping the symbolic leadership team's mode of operation - most of us felt having them be together isolated from our mainstream operations was keeping them far to distant from the day to day energy of our work - but no one had proposed they abdicate.

With this letter, the momentum toward the belief - and people acting out of the belief - that our organization was finished - gained considerable energy. The break-through team located in Chicago amidst our operation completed a plan to divest our annuity funds and allowing everyone to cash-out or to freeze them into pension program under the direction of an independent firm. Most choose to cash out.

It's important to state that while a lot of people distanced themselves from the formal structures of the ICA, most reconstituted themselves into some fashion to allow them to continue what they were doing but now they were doing it in collaboration with some other group, or they were doing it as an independent contractor. Many of them claimed that they were doing and being the ICA in this fashion. A nice gesture, but it did cause a lot of confusion then as to just what the ICA was becoming. Our colleague financial support base - which had been dwindling - now retreated like an reverse avalanche. All hell was breaking loose everywhere and no place was immune.

In Chicago the critical devastating blow was the announcement from our symbolic leadership couple that they, too, were moving on. This announcement came as no surprise really for it had been about two years before that the husband said he would give us two years. Obviously, we had not released him from his perspective. And frankly, no one really could come up with any perspective that showed him wrong.

That summer of 1988 we had two very clear choices: one, to throw in the towel, or, two, reconstitute the very foundations of our existence and to move out over uncharted waters. Our individual and collective consciousness was at an all time high. Everyone knew what was at stake. Everyone knew the fate of our very existence was on the line. Because the ICA was such a personally committed operation, the extinction of the organization meant a real personal death for those connected to it.



We were awash in a river of consciousness. Every moment was consciousness intensified. Every nuance of a colleague was analyzed as to their stance. Every statement was searched for hidden meanings. We were brittle, we were sensitized to the subtlest nuance. We were ripe for something dramatic to happen or to forever remain stigmatized and paralyzed in our consciousness of the unknown promise. We had become worn out in the toils the trials had taken out on us. We were numbed from the abdication of some of our closest friends. We felt guilty in our sense of powerlessness so unusual for a group that had proudly proclaimed everyone could control their own destiny. Was it all a lie? Had we missed an opportunity? Were those of us who constituted sort of a remnant blind to the evolutionary process and simply had not given into the indicative of the moment? Were we holding on to archaic structures that no longer had any meaning out of a blind loyalty that would surely seal our fate?

Doubt and despair prevailed in this moment.

### **THE UNION: 1988 - 1990**

But this momentary pause was also pregnant with possibility.

In July of 1988 some of us gathered on Saturday mornings as sort of an ad hoc grouping of folks who wanted to keep talking about our future. [Were we meeting out of sheer obedience to some long lost dream or in desperation?] We held two or three of these kind of sessions and out of it came a holding image of what we wanted to evolve into. We saw the powerful potential of the Kemper building beginning to take hold as more and more tenants gravitated toward using our space. What shocked us was the fact that they were all non-profit groups servicing one or another of the Uptown ethnic groups - a constituency that all of our previous market studies about how to use the building had overlooked. We could begin to see this albatross turn into a cash cow - well, maybe, not quite, but at least a viable income center. Our efforts to market and deliver our "Technologies of Participation" had already demonstrated themselves as a potential income generating mode. The critical piece that was missing was our "charitable service." Here we began to gravitate toward focusing on educational structures, especially public school reform. The new state legislation for Chicago Public Schools was being debated and that coincided with some work we had just completed with a patron who had "adopted" a school and wanted to extend that work. We combined this idea of service to education with the global infrastructure matters we maintained and envisioned the "2020 Initiative" - a task of catalyzing social change with a 20-20 vision for the next 30 years. While not spelling out the vision in detail, the theme "2020" caught hold our imaginations. It conveyed the service functions we wanted to maintain rather than simply "abandoning ship" and each going our separate ways.

Another key to this was the fact that many of us still wanted to maintain corporate residence. Living and working together had been a powerful support and while we generally have resisted the temptation to co-dependency, we wanted to re-image it for the future. We conceived of the "Residential Community Experiment" (RCX) as a holding image for what those of us in residence would try to model ourselves after. We knew this was important.

The next piece to put in place - and actually they happened in tandem - was the economic undergirding for the future. Clearly, the stipend system wherein we all pooled our income and distributed it - was dead. We conceived instead a system wherein we could give maximum freedom to each individual to be self-sufficient. This would put a push on those who had become dependent upon the group to carry them, but we felt it was time to make this move. Four of us were designated to untangle and reconstruct a financial system that attempted to satisfy all our values. The key was to have the ICA now begin paying salaries to its personnel and to begin to function distinct from the residential community. Then, each person would have their own source of income and if each wanted to maintain residence in our corporate facilities (the RCX), they could pay a room, board and "activity" fee for the



privilege of doing so. But there were to be no give-aways. Each person and family would be autonomous. So, we envisioned three separate - but interlocking - "profit centers."

First, those who had gravitated toward being the team to lease the building, operate our conference center and serve the building maintenance and management would be called the "Kemper Team" and their salaries and related expenses would come from the revenue generated by the building. In other words the building would become economically self-sufficient and in fact move toward becoming a real profit center for us. At least for now, a handful of folks accepted the challenge of just making it pay for itself. Since the building was legally owned by the Ecumenical Institute corporation, we sometimes called this the EI team.

Second, we kept together the "fee-for-services" and the "charitable services" together as the "Program Enterprise Team" (PET) and the "2020 Team" and put them under the "ICA" using that name to carry out their work. This was important because since the 2020 Team wasn't quite yet in full operation, the PET could nurture it into full existence.

The relation between the EI Kemper Team and the ICA's PET and 2020 Teams was important. In turn for "free rent" the ICA gave the EI free access to the support systems such as photocopier, transportation, phone, etc. In other words, we arbitrarily divided the expenses up for the purposes of convenience to enable each to have their own separate economic autonomy but yet function in an inter-related fashion. This we called "relational autonomy." Each would begin paying their own salaries and expenses, but each was dependent upon the others success. It was possible - if necessary - that we could have moved the entire ICA operation "down the street" as we would say - in order for it continue if the building couldn't generate income off of tenants and conferences.

Life's Mystery must have been working overtime for us because by the time we put this operation into place on September, 1988, the relative income that we had been receiving pretty well matched the number of salaries we could support. This was sheer serendipity. While no one was forced or coerced to leave or to make new decisions about their vocational journey, we achieved a relative match between our current income sources and the cost of the people and related expenses we would have starting this new schema.

We later put into place a reasonably handsome benefits package including HMO, pension, etc. And while we started (and continue) only a modest salary level, for the first time many of our people would begin building up social security accounts and acquire a level of financial freedom they had never had since the beginning of their professional life begun - in some cases - 20 years earlier when they first joined the ICA.

The third piece of the system entailed sketching out the Residential Community Experiment. We, of course, had to calculate backwards and forwards to make it work, but we came up with the image of \$550 per month per adult as a fee to be a part of the RCX. For this amount you would receive your housing, board and access to the privilege to be resident in a vibrant community of people who were trying to make a difference in the world. Starting on the beginning date everyone would keep and deposit their own salary - wherever they earned it - and in turn each one would pay the RCX the fee. Also, we needed each person to commit to so many hours each week to augment their financial fee to support the RCX by performing enablement functions, serving on various teams and to attend regular meeting of the community. We envisioned a learning community that would continue studies and collegiums. And by drawing upon all those who "worked out" - an old ICA phrase differentiating those who worked in for the ICA direct and those who maintained and who were assigned to work out in secular employment to earn the money to help support those who worked in - we could have a tremendous research into the world preventing any form of insularity from happening.



There were several major challenges we had to wrestle with before this whole system would work, however. First was the few international colleagues - a couple without green cards and whose tenure with us was uncertain. How would they support themselves? Amazingly once we got the system in place and communicated our resolve to no longer support international colleagues just because they happened to be in America, each and everyone one worked out an economic self-sufficient situation for themselves and all but one family has remained with us to this date. Another challenge was one of our number who had become for all practical purposes an invalid. While his health care needs were basically covered - in order to honor his lifelong commitment to our mission - we enacted a "support pool" portion in our RCX budget they gave us permission to have him - and possibly others of us in the future - a vehicle by which we would not be a burden upon the community.

There were tons of details in addition to these few that I have mentioned. The point is we not only could we see a future for ourselves but we designed a new way to support ourselves into it.

We decided this meant we had to launch this new mode of being in a highly symbolic way to connote the seriousness of it. We held two or three collegiums where the context for the new scheme was shared and the details of the new plan were talked through. There was enthusiastic support for the new model albeit some minor dispute over some of the details. The point is everyone embraced it. So, on September 1st, 1988, we held a ceremony in which each person was handed their "last stipend," and where in turn each declared their intent to be part of the Residential Community or not. No one was coerced, and everyone had the economic freedom to do what they individually wanted to do. Conversely, those who had by chance been playing the roles within the Kemper, Program Enterprise and would play the roles in the 2020 teams, were asked to publicly state if they were willing to risk being employees in a new venture with the understanding that each one had to carry out their responsibilities in order to make it work and in turn they would, for the first time, be receiving a salary for their labors. On September 15th, we began paying salaries. Four months later a stable benefit package was also in place. Within two years we gave ourselves a modest raise.

As a member of the finance team that put this whole model together, it was one of the most exhilarating times of my life when all the courage, conviction, creativity and care that I could muster was called for.

We weren't out of the woods but we began to smell victory rather than death. While the economic dimension of life is not the purpose of life, since it is foundational, without having it under control and managed, there will not be a future. We tamed the economic tyrant and had freed ourselves to move into the future. We were primed and poised to take on the new. It was a breathe of fresh air.

On our polity front all I can say is that for the most part we have not had any difficulties. We function very much with a shared leadership model. No one of us is the boss, Executive Director or whatever else. We operate with a highly consensual mode. We have established certain teams and task forces to handle particular details like the financial teams that oversee each of our operations. We have a space team, a celebration team and so forth. We invent on an "as needed" basis various "guide teams" to lead us through particular tasks we need to do collectively. One of the keys to this working is that fact that no one of us really wants to be designated leader - partially driven by a fear of witnessing what happens to one when so much is expected of that one person or family. From time to time different ones of us take center stage, but its momentary and we all understand each other well enough that no one us could ever take control over the rest. This system of shared leadership drives some of our Board members up the wall, especially those who are only comfortable with old patterns of how groups operate. "How can you guys function without a leader?" they ask. Our reply is that we do have a leadership dynamic and each one of us plays it.



That November, 1988, we held the scheduled quadrennial global conference in Mexico. Many more people came than expected because so many were concerned about what was happening to us with the disbanding of the Panchayat and the Break-Through teams and everything else. The plan to cash-out the annuity funds symbolized the end to the global infrastructure that had held us together for so many years. Many feared this was the end of us. While some locations had begun - in fact some had preceded us in figuring out their own version of a new system of operating - to think through their future, many had not. Some eventually collapse and dissolved. Nearly all would eventually take on a variety of different forms. Most gravitated toward sort of an entrepreneurial approach where each person in the Primary Unit forged out their own income generating mode and marketed themselves as the ICA. Many, many expressions of service were individually carved out. It was clear that the global ICA was undergoing a major "perestroika" of our own. It was exciting, it was scary, it was exhilarating. While every structure we had taken 20 plus years to build was evaporating underneath our feet as we talked, the excitement of building something that would propel us into the future overcame the inertia for most.

We, in Chicago, were fortunate to have been one place where the energy for creation exceeded the energy for collapse and dissolution. But, we did it thanks to circumstances and influences seemingly outside our control. Yet, we worked like hell to make it happen. Our delegation to the Mexico conference came back with a profound sense of gratitude for the road less traveled.

Then, as if we weren't affirmed enough by our own intuitions about what we thought was necessary, along came the researchers from Case Western Reserve University in the spring of 1989 who wanted to do an "appreciative inquiry" into what makes the ICA work and where it is going. It so happened that Chicago and the Heartland was to be the test site of the research effort. By the time it was over, 100 colleagues in the Midwest and another 50 around the world had a chance to tell their story of what makes us who we are. I've previously written about this enough that I won't belabor it here, suffice it to say that the Case Western project came as a healing salve to give people a chance to tell their story of who we are and what our greatness is. It felt like a great big absolution to your remaining fears and guilt one still may have harbored about our past and our future. It was a catharsis of the spirit.

People purged themselves of any remaining hurt and anxiety. People reaffirmed our fundamental uniqueness well below our structural apparatus. We realized that its not structures that hold a group like us together, it's spirit.

Some of us went to Brussels in September of 1989 to help reconstitute the ICA International - a structural vehicle we created some years earlier as a way of having a sponsor for the IERD event in 1984. We recast the role of ICAI to fill the gap left with the removal of the global infrastructure, not in any practical sense, but in the sense of the void left without having a unifying glue that webbed us together around the world. During this week's convocation, additional Appreciative Inquiry interviews were held and one the university researchers gave his report at the end and said the ICA is like "The Hero with a Thousand Faces" where there is a thousand difference expressions and manifestations of what we do practically in the world and how we do it, but at the core there is a single set of "non-negotiable values" that we all share in common. I cried.

And cried some more when we chose as the first president of the ICAI the lady from Germany whose role up to now had been to attend any and all our gatherings and serve as support and enablement to it without ever saying very much. She was the servant Leo personified. When she first addressed the group as our symbolic leader, you knew that not only had we made the right choice, we had a bright future in deed. Service was at the core of who we are and that is our leadership style and our contribution to history. It all became very clear through the tears of joy and exhilaration.

Back home that same summer we visited 70 local public schools in Chicago and gained a foothold on our service mission. The embryonic vision of an educational service in Chicago we foresaw a



year earlier was coming into focus. Within three years we would have worked with 70 local public schools in Chicago and gained a reputation for knowing how to change human lives in the classroom.

Later in the fall we convened a meeting of the network of facilitators who were either marketing as the ICA or on their own to initiate the interchange and sharing mechanism that continues to this day. We have found ways to support one another in our geographic dispersion that has enabled a single-minded effort to share the ICA methods with as broad a constituency as possible operating in a thousand different modes to do it. The convener of this second meeting was a former staff member who left us some 10 years earlier. Perhaps, in letting go of our past, we were beginning to reclaim it.

During this two year time period, we all collectively felt as if we had encountered something very profound that we have yet to be able to adequately name. Part of it had to do with being at one with our past and our destiny. Part of it had to do with experiencing a joy unspeakable as we were continually being blessed by life itself. Sure, we worked hard to achieve the results we did, we did not give up. But what came back to us because of our faith was something far more than what we had put in, or so it seemed. We were more aligned with our foundational values than we had been in a long time yet the exterior trappings were unrecognizable from anything previous. It was like we were purged of all the negative reasons why we couldn't be what we wanted to be. We were at peace with ourselves for the first time in a long time. We had discovered a sort of Sea of Tranquillity and were being bathed in its healing powers. We were primed for greatness.

#### **THE RETURN: 1990 - 1992**

We had become a new reality, not by walking away from ourselves to discover something new, but by occasioning a metamorphosis of ourselves within. It was time we portrayed ourselves as this new reality to our constituency, our Board members, our colleagues across the Heartland, our new emerging membership base, our clients. We had come through a symplegedes and were positioned to take advantage of the momentum and exhilaration that comes from victory. We were perched for a giant take off.

But this take off never materialized in the fullest of its promise. In fact, the next few months had an eerie familiarity to them. It was as if things were really very much the same: each month we had to struggle to achieve our bottom-line and pay-days were sweated out. We even had to eat up our modest cash reserves to make ends meet. The promise of fulfillment never arrived. And a slow feeling of disappointment set in. Old wounds resurfaced. It began to dawn on us that just because we had weathered a terrific storm did not mean our future was guaranteed.

Unsettled, we settled in. We lived in paradox. On the one hand we experienced small bursts of new energy in our direct work, for example with the public schools. On the other hand, for all our work and labor, no one seemed to give us the recognition it was due. We felt somewhat unappreciated, not in a psychological sense but in a sociological one; no one knew what we knew and we weren't able to communicate it. It was a period of discomfort.

Another source of the discomfort came from our Board in their desire to have us objectify our internal operating policy and procedures. We were extremely reluctant to undertake their commission - openly refusing it first - and finally accepted the charge. We spent several staff meetings and small groups worked to simply try to articulate how we function for the benefit of our Board to be able to understand how we did it. While the exercise was somewhat useful, we were unclear as to the motive of the Board. It felt as if they were trying to find a way to "control" the staff in some unwanted fashion. The feelings were vague and there was limited enthusiasm for the assignment on our part.



We also wrestled uncomfortably with our growth design and pattern. Some wanted even larger increases in salary to become more commensurate with the world's standards. Others wanted to increase the staff size in order to increase our service capacity. We have successfully avoided this basic conflict permitting it to fester unattended.

So we have begun to come to terms with the fact that while internally we have changed quite a bit, relations with our external constituents remains largely the same. We have become more patient with groups undergoing their own version of transformation having learned to recognize the patterns of internal strife, but this has not translated into any particular or increased recognition of our capacity to assist groups in their transformation. The book on our methods has been published and is being circulated now and there some evidence that is being accepted in circles outside our own network of contacts.

Just recently there is some evidence that the world is beginning to take note of our prowess as a group that is master of change processes. A reference in the Harvard Business Review, an interest in our community development facilitation capacities by a major national foundation, an acceptance of our facilitation skills within government circles are signals of our future, we hope.

We have come to see that just because we achieved something great for ourselves does not necessarily translate into "this worldly" recognition of it and that in order to continue on the journey we must claim the promises that are ours rather than waiting for them to come to us.

One example of our not waiting is the proactive stance we have elected to take toward our Board. We have decided to undertake a series of staff collegiums designed to try to articulate for ourselves the who we are and how we function rather than succumb to their pressures that we acquiesce toward more traditional types of organizational structures. One of the keys is the attempt to articulate the values, purpose and operation of our style of shared leadership. Most people disbelieve that it is possible and yet we have found that to be the only way that works for us. We think we have stumbled upon a unique sort of polity experiment without a lot of intentionality and think we should try to describe its workings for the benefit of others. We are trying to take our own internal strife and allow them to inform us about the future style of organizational life that could be replicated in other organizations.

These collegiums have renewed our sense of freedom that we are in control of our own fate and destiny. Like turning a sock inside out, we are trying to grab our toe and pull it through the rest of our being in order to disclose replicable learnings for others. This process is underway as this is being written and therefore its outcome is unknown. The witness as of this writing is that the process of doing it has given us a new burst of confidence in our capacity to be representational in our own life together rather than feel isolated and removed from the mainstream of organizations like us.

We have come upon the Mountain of Care and have begun to climb it with open eyes and a joyous heart. The journey is not complete; the story is not finished; the end is not yet attained. For the journey is a continual struggle to be authentic to oneself and to one's neighbor.



# A short reflection on the story just completed

## REFLECTIONS

### ON HAVING PERFORMED THE LEARNING ACTIVITY

I experienced two major learnings by doing this activity that seem a little paradoxical.

First is the discovery that personal transformation metaphors can in fact help interpret the events of organization transformation. But secondly, I discovered while writing this story of the ICA's transformation, it was I that was writing it and that even though I relied upon input and stories from my colleagues, there is necessarily a personal interpretative dimension to it that can't be helped. In other words, many of the slants, innuendos and spins I put on the objective events were my own invention and not necessarily shared by all my colleagues.

of course!

Fortunately, however, in sharing drafts of the story to some of them, there was general agreement that the basic motif does in fact hold up to their experiences of the same events. I think, therefore, that the basic discovery of this learning exercise is in tact.

As an alternative way to do it, if any group would want to pursue it, would be to follow-up the "Wall of Wonder" exercise with a "corporate writing" exercise. Another way would be to invite a group of colleagues to participate in the myth module exercise and invite them each to use the group's journey as their common experiential base they were all to draw upon and then to share what each person had written to see the similarities and the differences.

I believe that while I don't have the precise written procedures ready at this time, I could easily take my experiences and convert them into a corporate exercise that could be utilized with other clients in helping them to make sense out of their transformational journeys as a group and thereby have a way to reflect upon and appropriate wholesomely the deep changes that necessarily is a part of profound transformation.

One last thing has to be said of the last phase of the journey, "The Return." I am relatively unsettled with this section of the story as it compares to the other three. I have been trying to cope with this dilemma and have concluded that it is a result of one of two things: either the story is unfinished and that we are still in the return and I can't really see it yet because I have not fully lived it, or, the "return" was not complete, meaning that we failed to make the return and that our boon is still waiting to be given over to the world.

Only time will tell, because while the hero paradigm is instructive it is not determinative. It can only be seen in retrospect, not in foresight. For now, it is important to live the journey and hopefully live to tell about it later.

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Jim Loxel