

Connectedness

Jean Boulton

Early evening and I go into my lounge. The view of the Limpley Stoke valley is undeniably beautiful and yet I feel detached. The evening stretches ahead; many possibilities for distraction are available. I can read a book or phone a friend, throw toys for bored Dog, check for emails, even stir myself to water the outside pots. I am warm and comfortable but sort of numb and, using that phrase from my childhood, Fed Up. Fed up to the ears with all the diversions I could possibly consume.

Flip to North Wales twenty four hours later. I am walking down a steep track near Llanberis, on my way to Cae Mabon, carrying luggage and bedding. Dog has cheered up immensely. I arrive in a clearing in the woods and there are a number of low buildings, some wooden, some round, some thatched. They are focused around a natural amphitheatre with a fireplace in the centre. The stream running past the buildings is really noisy, but there is no, absolutely no, sound of traffic.

I sit down and look up at the sky through the trees. It strikes me that this is the sort of place where a Bronze Age family would have settled. And I am hit by a sudden experience of connecting, as if a long-buried gate to a long-forgotten cave has opened. An archetypal, limbic glimmer stirs within. I am moved to tears.



'What is man without the beasts? If all the beasts were gone, man would die from great loneliness of spirit. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth. If men spit on the ground they spit on themselves. All things are connected.'

Chief Seattle, 1854

Connectedness, the thesis of Edward O Wilson, sociobiologist (1978 and 2006), is that man's interest in living in communities is a quest for survival; in other words the qualities of altruism and a willingness to mediate individual needs for the good of the larger community have an evolutionary origin. He suggests that our spiritual focus similarly promotes altruistic behaviour and social cohesion. So survival of the fittest really means survival of the fittest community or, to be more precise, fittest ecology. He further makes the point that We, in wanting to belong to and protect our own community, are pre-disposed to compete with the Other - They who have resources We want. And, of course if they have a different creed, we have reason to hate and distrust them and a cast iron excuse for trying to eliminate 'Evil' and for trying to take more than our fair share of resources at the same time. Nowadays it is called neo-conservatism!

Complexity science, emerging in parallel with Wilson's work, in the 1970's (Prigogine and Stengers, 1984), particularly through the work of Ilya Prigogine in Brussels, picks up the same theme - the central nature of relationship and interconnectivity rather than a focus on the separation of things. The theme of co-evolution and co-creation rather than design or control is congruent with Brian Swimme's (2001) words in an interview. He suggests that the solution to our current crisis, both in terms of global conflict and in terms of our relationship with the earth, is *'to live with mutually enhancing relationships - not just with humans but with all beings - so that our activities actually enhance the world'*.

Complexity science (Boulton and Allen, 2006) also emphasises that change and evolution occur in the particular, in the moment. It supports the notion that small, sometimes chance events or specific persons or unique situations can tip the balance and lead to big changes. What would have happened if Nelson Mandela had died in prison? Or if Henry Ford had liked electric cars not petrol cars? Or if there had not been an asteroid to precipitate the extinction of the dinosaurs? Imagine if Margaret Thatcher had never had elocution lessons!

The paradox explored by complexity theory is that it seems that by and large things do unfold in relatively predictable ways, but there are moments, so-called tipping points (Gladwell, 2000), where the future is held in the balance and the particular events at that moment will determine whether we go in one direction or another. It is as if we are poised near the top

of a mountain on a narrow ledge and could walk higher or, if we fell, fall in a number of alternative directions; what finally tips us into this valley rather than that one can be a chance gust of wind. If we were not on the ledge, the gust would not be critical, but on that narrow ledge everything is critical and when the moment is passed, there is no going back. In the words of Shakespeare,

*There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune:
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.
On such a full sea are we now afloat:
And we must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our ventures.*

This importance of the unique and particular seems to be how the universe works. The big bang did not spread matter in a uniform and symmetrical fashion – each spec of dust counted and was unique and any other spread of dust would have resulted in a different universe and maybe no universe at all (Laszlo, 1996). And the same is true in our world. As Whitman (1891) said, ‘*a leaf of grass in no less than the journeywork of the stars*’

In fact Swimme (2001) goes on to suggest that great leaps of imagination and breakthrough in understanding come from a deep memory of where we came from, from the material of the stars of which we are made. And this idea of the embedded nature of knowing is supported anecdotally from quite a different direction, by recently reported (and clearly contentious) cases of people with transplants taking on some of the personality characteristics of the donor (2002) - for example an ability to paint not previously shown.

And maybe my visceral sense of connection with the earth experienced in North Wales was another such example of deep memory? I must remember to ask Dog.

So where does this take us? My argument is that we are pre-disposed biologically to recognise that communities are necessary, and we are supported in this view by the ‘new science’ of complexity which demonstrate that it is through interconnectivity and diversity that adaptability and evolution occur. But, if we are to survive, our next evolutionary step must be to re-define the notion of community and make it all-encompassing. We need to be able to embrace all life and indeed the whole world in our Us and let go of the notion of a Them. We need to find a ‘mutually enhancing’ way of living, as Swimme suggests.

Equally, we must recognise that not everything is reversible; it can get too late to put things right and turn things around. And we may not always know whether we are still on a safe path and can retrace our steps or are very near the narrow ledge where a puff of wind will decide our fate.

And, as complexity science shows, we must not underestimate the power of the small to affect the whole. And this is of course hugely empowering for we cannot hide behind the notion that we are too insignifi-

cant to make a difference. In the words attributed to William James:

I am done with great things and big plans, great institutions and big success and I am for those tiny, invisible, loving human forces that work from individual to individual, creeping through the crannies of the world like so many soft rootlets, or like the capillary oozing of water, yet which, if you give them time, will rend the hardest monuments of pride.

Postscript

Two days after finishing this article, I came across two items in the *Independent* (September 9 2006) which, in different ways were in support of some of what is written here. The first story describes the work of Mark Van Vugt, professor of social psychology at the University of Kent. He says:

‘It turns out that men were more altruistic to their own group if there was a perceived threat from an outside competing group.’

This supports Edward O Wilson’s views on cooperation first expressed in the 1970’s. The second tells the story of how two rival gang leaders, one white, one Asian were trained as youth workers by Peterborough County Council’s Unity scheme and became firm friends. To quote Shaahid,

‘Two years ago I wasn’t in school and I was on the wrong path to life. Now I am educated, I know about different cultures and different religions. I feel comfortable with everyone. My job now is to tell the kids who are younger than me that violence is a dead end.’

This story illustrates what can be done if people are given the opportunity to widen the boundaries of what they perceive as **their** community.

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