



A pearl contribution in support of

'inspiring women leaders... dare we?'

INNOVATION? A SHORT STORY ABOUT 'INSPIRING WOMEN LEADERS... DARE WE?'

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'Innovation is an act of leadership'. Why do I think this? Because I see innovation as something that requires taking a risk: to put out into the world, something new, having some faith that it will be well received, adopted or desired. Innovation requires investing your heart, soul, time, money, effort and reputation into making it happen; and to be made manifest, innovation requires someone to stand out there, enrolling and inspiring others to join in the venture. Leaders step out on their own; take risks; hold on to their faith when others may falter; stand firm when others may wish to give up.'

These thoughts occurred to me as I reflected on this month's theme. And then, as is so often the case, I felt the need to refer to someone else's definition and found some resonance in the final sentence and dissonance in the 'making a commodity' of the concept, as in the first sentence.

Innovation: the process by which an idea or invention is translated into a good or service for which people will pay. To be called an innovation, an idea must be replicable at an economical cost and must satisfy a specific need. Innovation involves deliberate application of information, imagination, and initiative in deriving greater or different value from resources [businessdictionary.com]

This definition bore little relation to my felt experience.... and so once again, I turn inwards... reflecting on my own lived experience and to see if I could draw out any insights, learning or principles that could be applied more broadly.

So what does 'innovation' mean to me?

I am someone who often has ideas – lots of ideas! Most of my 'fabulous' ideas evaporate into the ether. And then every now and again, one of two things happens: EITHER I get attached to an idea OR an idea gets attached to me.

Now, I can hear you saying 'well doesn't that amount to the same thing?'

Well, actually, No, at least not for me. And here's why.

When I get attached to an idea...

... I find myself – my ego – getting caught up in the 'idea' in a way that becomes excluding; it's mine and I don't want to share it.... I get scared that someone else will steal it and ... and... and... the catastrophic fantasies that plague any of us who happens to be a human being, begin to play out in my head. What has happened in such scenarios is that unhelpful fictions and beliefs have activated my feelings of fear and so I begin to behave from a place of scarcity. This is such a yucky



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place to be! Needless to say, when that happens to me... I get into pushing and forcing and yet nothing much happens. The idea does not become reality; there is no innovation.

However, in contrast,

When an idea gets attached to me...

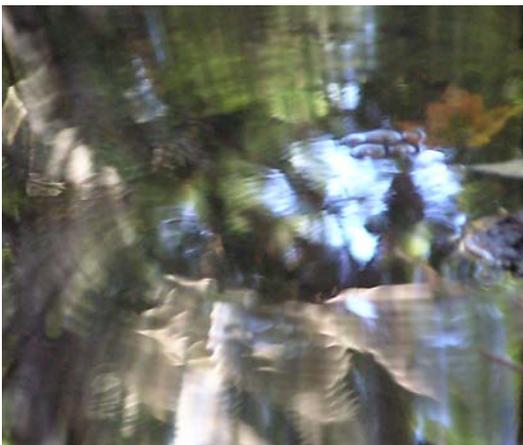
...I find myself getting excited. My passion comes alive and this 'thing' quite simply won't let me go. I want to talk about it; share it; and if it is big, I want to involve others and see if anyone wants to play with me. Amazingly what happens is that energy and engagement begins to build and the 'idea' begins to take on a life of its own. The 'right'¹ people with the 'right' talents, relevant contributions and energy start spinning around and toward the 'idea'.

What I realise is different here, is that the 'idea' is actually more of an 'intention' or 'purpose'. In my 5th article on *'The Big Society – People Power'* I used the metaphor of a spinning top – where the central axis represents the unifying purpose around which people with passion can apply their energy, moving in the same direction, making something possible that, without all the players playing their part at the 'right' time, would not happen. The top won't spin if timing is out and/or energy is applied in conflicting directions.

So when an idea or intention becomes attached to me, it is as if something that has not quite formed into a clear vision has decided to use me as the vehicle through which it can be made manifest. I sense that I am servant to and custodian of it, rather than being its driver. I don't push and yet things happen because they seem to want to happen; there is flow in and between those of us involved. Let me illustrate this with a current unfolding example.

Practising 'Presencing' or 'Adaptive action'

For a couple of years I have been in transition, lacking clarity about the exact nature of my path yet knowing that I am on one! Imagine looking into a pool of water which has an endless stream of drops of water splashing into it. The surface of the water is so disturbed that it is impossible to make clear sense of the reflected image. This has been my recent reality – no clear vision yet still having a sense that my purpose has been guiding each step I have taken.



Sometimes my steps have made no outward sense; some have seemed risky; and some have even brought about great short-term discomfort and frustration. I have had times of doubt, even despair.

Yet what has been emerging in the last 10 months has arrived through my staying present to and

¹ Right – I am using this term as short-hand for 'fit-for-purpose' and not that there are the right people and the wrong people/ talents/ time etc



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engaging with what feels like an unfolding synchronicity. A word that eased its way into my vocabulary around 18 months ago is 'faith'. Not in any religious sense; rather in simply having faith beyond evidence that something was to be. There have been times when opportunities have presented themselves to me and I have simply known that I must take them. At those times, there was no intellectualising tyrannising my decision-making. And the gift in this moment of writing is the realisation that I now find myself holding a venture which I sense will shape my destiny for years to come. Below is a snapshot of my part of the story so far.

What? Now What?

For years, I have been thinking about writing and others in my world have encouraged me to do so, yet I never did. But in 2009 I decided to create a website and in late 2009 and early 2010, I began writing its content.

In February I am introduced to a woman called Karen in a pub in Manchester, who had come to attend a workshop - in which I subsequently make an unusual contribution to illustrate a point about women and power: I run under a table!

2 weeks later Karen contacts me to ask if I will write an article for her 6-month old online magazine. I think wow! That would get me writing! I say 'yes' and rather boldly say 'can I write a series?' She says OK and comments with surprise at her saying 'yes', even though she has never read anything I have written.

So what?

I continue moving through life with an unclear vision. The world economic crisis deepens. People talk about doing things differently yet there seems to be little evidence of transformation occurring. I write my first article.

Karen and I meet up for lunch. She talks about a meeting with a woman called Linda and the 'women in the Board room' crisis. Something stirs in me ... there is something for me to do here... I know it. But what?

I attend a conference in Nova Scotia and strike up an extraordinary connection with two international pioneers in women's leadership development and whole systems transformation – Barbara and Glenda.

Sharing some deep questions, it becomes clearer to me... I am wanting to do 'something' for senior women leaders in Scotland. I talk about it in a circle of some 50+ people ... saying 'who the hell am I to think I can do this?' Others give me feedback saying...'you will do this... you must.... I can see you doing it'.

I don't know what it could be... and I feel really uncomfortable about 'taking in a product or service' ... I think about loads of other things I should be doing ...none builds any energy in me or anyone else.

Barbara invites me to a group of her London CIYO alumni and I meet Tania who is moving to Edinburgh.

I continue to write and coach and work with a Board in crisis and secure work abroad with Microsoft.

Information about there being an under-representation of women in the board room and in senior management realms becomes more prominent in the press.



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A conversation with Beth and Jo at a soggy BBQ and it comes to me – to us: what we could do is put on an event where we gather together senior women and engage them in dialogue and exploration about their visions, hopes, aspirations and support needs. It seems so simple. Don't assume; don't tell. Invite, inspire, inquire, co-create.

I write about it and draw – the concept captivates me. It takes shape in my mind and in my being.

The energy has already taken hold. Jo organises a meeting for us with Judith. Congruence and coherence - the vision gets clearer. Judith does what we do not – we bring something she rarely comes across. She is in. We agree a date. Judith books the venue within 2 days.

Another conversation with Karen. She too is excited and keen to support. She puts us in touch with Jenny. We meet. She says she is cautiously interested and yet immediately starts talking to women about the 'idea'. She is hooked too – not by us but by 'it'.

Now what?

Tania meets Jo and I for lunch. We tune in to each other.

I am in Canada for a week and there is week-long exploration of the under-representation of women in senior leadership roles in the main Toronto newspaper. It fascinates me; excites me; bugs me.

I am working away for 2 months. Training with Glenda; talking with Barbara. My intentions and vision become stronger and clearer. A sleepless night brings forth the 'mother of all mind-maps'. I can see it all.

I share with Barbara and Glenda who get more excited and offer whatever support or input we want.

Jo and I talk about inviting Tania onto the Core Design Team. I call her. She is passionate – but has time constraints.

I pay to secure the venue. Jo, Karen, Judith, Jenny and I meet; all of a buzz; energy pulsing and rising. It will happen. It seems like madness.... Time frame tight but we somehow think we can pull it off. Karen links us to Linda. Jo connects with her and many interested women begin to flow towards us...

We 'land' the brand: '**inspiring women leaders... dare we?**' 'Yes!' We are all, 'all in'.

Pre-invitation honed to perfection; now fanning out into the hands of senior women in Scotland. It will happen. In response to our 'honed pre-invitation' for the event, Barbara Cecil comments: '*I LOVE this invitation. I can tell you right now, it's going to work. You are on a clear beam.*'

The top is spinning fast and true.

Resources are required to secure the date. We trust it is coming sooner or later.

Sense-making: through the eyes of complex adaptive systems theory

I am intrigued by this unfolding experience. Is it a process of conventional innovation? It doesn't feel like that. Perhaps it is more akin to what Otto Scharmer might refer to as '*presencing something that is wanting to happen*' such as in his 'Theory U'? I feel far more resonance with this, as my lived 'process' over these last few months has been one of paying attention to what is



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emerging and then taking decisive action in moments of intuitive clarity and not taking action without it.

Another way to look at this process is through the eyes and various lenses of Human Systems Dynamics:

- that what we are in the midst of is the emergence of a '*point attractor pattern*' – that elements (more and more research, evidence and examples of people paying attention to and taking action about the issue) in the system are naturally converging and that by tuning in to what is forming in the system, we are able to amplify and speed up the energy and activity to more consciously shape the conditions in the system – in this case, organise an event to support women to come together for creative, collaborative engagement to see how we can transform ourselves, the way we do business and how to support more women into senior leadership positions
- that what we are bearing witness to is movement towards a tipping point (a term made popular by Malcolm Gladwell). What Gladwell is actually referring to, is a phenomenon called '*self-organised criticality*' or the '*power law*' – where small changes in a system build tension until a shift precipitates a sudden major release causing a greater, systemic change. Perhaps our event will be the final small change that precipitates the sudden major release causing that systemic change? Now that would be exciting!
- That what we are doing could potentially create a Butterfly effect – a tiny, seemingly insignificant action combining with system dynamics to create a huge impact in the wider system?

We may not be able to predict the outcomes of our actions on this system in which we are playing but I for one, am hoping that by staying present to the impact of our actions, we can anticipate and influence and be THE difference that makes the difference.

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