

## LIVING WELL WHERE WE LIVE

### *Exploring Self-organizing Leadership in a self-organizing world.*

*From Anne Stadler, 1/18/10*

#### Preamble:

July 3, 2009:

I'm sitting at a long table covered in white linen, set with silver cutlery, china plates, and tapered wine glasses. A similar table crosses mine about eight persons away from me. A line of small votive candles runs the full length of the center of each table. Fifty people are here, in a long narrow high-ceilinged gallery, surrounded by art created by nine artists.

We've been eating a dinner inspired by the chef's experience of camping for a week near Exit 27 of the I-5 freeway. His experience is part of the art exhibit: described on video, as well as eaten at the table. Tools and artifacts that helped him live well, where he lived, are hanging on one wall of the room. It has been a meal rich in conversation and edible nourishment.

Tom Sieverts, an urban planner and guest from Bonn, Germany, rises to initiate a conversation about the exhibit and how the vision of the artists opens us to the space where we live. He is an erect fellow with a shock of white hair. His German accented English gives him a somewhat formal air that's belied by an engaging manner. He says something like this:

"We're in this room with white walls and high ceilings. On the walls I see works of art. Little candles are lighting the long tables, forming the shape of a cross. There is such life here, such friendship, I feel I am in a church!"

With that simple statement, he blessed the gathering—not by uttering abstract philosophies, but by honoring the concrete details of place and his response to it.

Sieverts was in Seattle as part of a public conversation sponsored by Suddenly.org—a global inquiry launched by Matthew Stadler.

For many years, my work has centered on the question of how can humans live fully, with maximum individual creativity-- in community? What is the natural integration of the practical and the spiritual that gives rise to inspired leadership (or as I've named it, Self-organizing leadership?--the capital "S" standing for higher self), on behalf of the self and the whole?

I've experienced the human patterns of self-organizing in an Open Space learning community of practice, that met face to face and on-line for seven years. And I've co-founded several other organizations in which I've tested the hypotheses gained in my experimentation.

Tom Sieverts's work and that of my son Matthew, as expressed in **Suddenly.org**, have given my question a new impetus and focus.

**Suddenly.org** is a story of how self-organizing has led to a new pattern of human settlement—one that defies our cultural, social and legal assumptions about urban and rural life, and resists our attempts to corral the messiness by applying the old rules.

At the global level, **Suddenly** is a self-organized world-wide conversation sparked by the work of Thomas Sieverts and conducted in events that are linked digitally in a website: [www.suddenly.org](http://www.suddenly.org), and a book, Where We Live Now, an annotated reader.

At the local/regional level, **Suddenly** is a public inquiry, self-organized by a circle of folks in Portland, Oregon; Seattle and Burien, Washington, USA. It is an engagement with Thomas Sieverts' insights that has included publication of the book, a keynote presentation, panel conversations; a film and discussion; an art exhibit and discussion, a video and a delicious dinner in a vacant parking lot followed by formal conversation.

At a personal level, it is an opportunity to examine: How shall we live well together, where we live now? and to enact new forms to answer that question collectively.

Matthew Stadler explained the collective challenge: *How can I find common meaning, and common space with the people who are in this inquiry? We are enacting the creation of a new form, created by a strategy of dispersal and gathering, in an unfolding series of dispersal*

*and physical and digital gatherings. Our focus is the creation of a common ground of cultural meaning that meets in a single narrative.*

### **The situation and the challenge:**

As Thomas Sieverts points out in the first chapter of the annotated reader: Where We Live Now,

“Decisions by individuals *acting independently* are resulting in complex interpenetrating systems that include the built environment, nature, town and country.

“The landscape where we live now, which is neither city nor country but has characteristics of both, has no suitable name nor is it visually remarkable ...

“The urban periphery, the urbanized countryside—or as I call it—where we live now-- is generally seen as a cultural void. The cultural content of this landscape cannot be held up against any existing measures of high culture or popular culture of landscape or natural beauty. Nor can its visual or formal possibilities be grasped in this way.

“The city is transforming itself into something new.”

Sieverts demonstrates that across the planet, human settlement is occurring in an in-between landscape mingling nature, town, country, and in many cases settling more densely than in the central urban “core”.

After analyzing the current situation and showing that our old assumptions and models don’t apply to the way we are settling our environment now, Sieverts identifies the challenge we face:

“Conceptual models and planning concepts are necessary, but the decisive elements for a more human development of the landscape where we live are the relationships people have with one another, with the cultural quality of their city, and with nature and the environment.

“Unless we socially, culturally and economically cultivate the landscape where we live, all technical and economic efforts--I am convinced of this—will remain fruitless. Indispensable for such

cultivation is a new political and administrative understanding of the landscape where we live.”

And, as Thomas Sieverts points out, each area of settlement is a fractal of the larger systems, reflecting the patterns and pressures of the whole system.

Reading his analysis, you become aware that you are observing the characteristic behavior of a complex self-organizing system of settlement, as well as participating in it as an individual self-organizing entity!

### **Suddenly is a self-organizing global inquiry:**

**Suddenly.org** is a web-site location for a global inquiry, with events manifesting in Portland Oregon, Los Angeles, New York City, Tokyo, Berlin, and Spain...wherever people want to step up and take responsibility.

Matthew Stadler and his organizing circle of colleagues are conducting their work as a gift exchange, with each person taking responsibility for his/her part of the overall experience. The exchange has included both money and work as appropriate and agreed in individual transactions. The form of the work in each location varies, depending on the constellation of people convening it. Matthew Stadler and the book Where We Live Now are the constants. The website functions as a virtual space, containing an archive, blogs, and a calendar.

Stadler’s acknowledgment at the beginning of the book describes the essence of the collaboration:

*“The entire project called Suddenly, has depended on the generous hard work of talented people who, if they are paid at all, are never paid enough. Our reward is the work we do together...I feel lucky to have found such talented people. The time and effort they gave to this project may not bring them the money they deserve, but it will enrich the public of which they are a part. I’m convinced it will prove worthwhile. Thank you.”*

Where We Live Now, Portland: September, 2008.

Each day, for five days, Thomas Sieverts engaged with a different group of colleagues in a public conversation moderated by Matthew Stadler.

Partners included institutions such as the Pacific Northwest College of the Arts, the University of Oregon Department of Architecture in Portland, Reed College Art Gallery, a parking lot owned by Goodwill in Beaverton, and many individuals.

They looked at histories of settlement and migration in North Pacific America, predating the arrival of European immigrants. Reed College hosted an art exhibit. In public conversations artists, architects and planners engaged these questions: How do art and writing provide meaning for the city? What is the relation of art to urban policy? How do artists locate and work with the “edge” condition that is the place for meaning making? How can public policy liberate urban and architectural design? How does an architect’s relationship with clients inform what could happen in public policy?

On several occasions, they modeled a way of being in relationship that forced people to do an activity while they raised questions about that activity. For instance, they had a fancy dinner with delicious food, cloth tablecloths and napkins, china and silverware, outdoors, in a run-down parking lot, with alders poking up through cracks in the asphalt, in a Beaverton Oregon mall, next to a creek running through and under the parking lot. As a misty rain began, they improvised a temporary shelter and shielded several open fires to provide comfort and cooking. A nearby Thai family restaurant catered the dinner. There was music. In the conversation that followed, the questions were: How do we take the urban landscape seriously as **part of** our culture and our built environments? What shall we do-- how shall we act-- in order to cultivate this new urban habitat for all to occupy in common for a long time?

### **Suddenly’s self-organizing leadership:**

A small circle of key collaborators is at the heart of the project. When necessary, they recruit and attract additional people to support the project. A couple of non-profit organizations house contributions that came in to defray expenses. When the activity is over, the voluntary

organizational structure dissolves. The relationships formed provide fertile ground for future practical activities to emerge.

Appropriate tools are available for all to use: the book focuses and amplifies the inquiry, the narrative and its meaning. The digital environment expands the capacity and reach of the face to face relationships and the evolving common ground of cultural meaning.

Matthew and his comrades are bringing it home: a gift exchange, a temporary dwelling for nourishment and engagement at all levels; a calling for a deeper history of place. What new patterns are revealed when we look to the deeper history of ourselves engaging the place where we live?

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### ***What I am learning in Suddenly.org***

I have now participated in two series of **Suddenly** public events: in Portland, Oregon; Seattle, and Burien, Washington. These events included art and artists as well as conversations. What attracts me is the possibility of living consciously in a feedback system: living in the material world of in-betweenness by enacting leadership patterns and relationships that take us into the “in-between” world of freedom and possibility in which Art lives.

The presence and practices of art shift the transpersonal conditions of our public engagement.

Art (and high performance physical activity) takes us directly into the in-between (transpersonal/spiritual) field. Experiencing art, witnessing art, and making art, open us to the source of the life force. "It's the direct experience of the God field: alive, direct and practical.

*Wholeness as it is.*" (This is a partial-quote/ paraphrase from The Nature of Order, Book 4: The Luminous Ground , Christopher Alexander.)

Ralph Waldo Emerson put it in another way: He reminds us that the energy behind the poetic (Art) impulse is that of connecting one's own small flame to the great central fires of life: "A spark of fire is infinitely

deep; but a mass of fire reaching from earth upward into heaven, this is the sign of the robust, united, burning, radiant soul."

Bringing Art into the "field" of a civic endeavor engages the fire of a communal transformational opening—a flow of life force in a condition of radical uncertainty.

*Art in the center of urban life:*

*Suddenly in Burien, Washington, July 2009:*

Until 1993, Burien was a place of modest houses, parking lots and places to buy automobiles, arranged in the rectangular grid of city building, in a rural part of southwest King County near SeaTac airport. Then, under pressure of development that was not to their liking, citizens decided to form a city. Hundreds of people participated in creating a shared vision.

Since then, they've consciously lived their vision: passing bond issues, raising money. They planned a perfect town center. They transformed a four-lane highway into a main street. They hired a team of architects, who shared their values, to design an ideal town square and commons, attracted a developer to build tasteful housing and retail, installed a lovely sculpture, a manicured park and the ultimate democratic statement: a City Hall/Library building. Halfway through the building process, the bottom fell out of the national economy: leaving no more money to complete the last two residential/business complexes; nothing in the rest of the Town Square but asphalt pavement.

Some people might feel that unexpected event ruined all their plans. But, Burien chose to greet this surprise by inviting life, creativity, and improvisation into the in-between messed-up space that was now their Town Square. Two artists with help from the developer, the architects, county and city officials, literally put the fires of creation and the making of art, right into the center of the community, creating the Burien Interim Art Space. Here stands "Passages", sometimes known fondly as "Spaghetti woman and her daughter". The woman and child are linked by flame. The statues stand fifty feet high. They stride south

toward Mt. Rainier surrounded by an ever-expanding variety of home-grown art!!

In July, I joined about a hundred Burien citizens at a community picnic outdoors on a warm summer evening in the Burien Interim Art Space. Local café owners hosted a delicious supper. We sat at round tables, chatting, as the Thursday farmer's market stalls were dismantled and people arrived from their work. To the east, airplanes were taking off from SeaTac airport. We were there to explore Burien's answer to **Suddenly's** question: how do you live well where you live?

And we learned how, there in the Burien Interim Art Space. In response to uncertainty, citizens, led by artists, created a place for making and witnessing art and friendship; extended an invitation to participate; provided a temporary setting of home, celebration, and loving attention, centered in a passage to a visionary future.

In this political cultural act, Burien raised a "mass of fire reaching from earth upward into heaven". It was (as Emerson said) the city's "sign of the robust, united, burning, radiant soul."

This is art as a political, social, cultural intervention in a landscape of uncertainty.

**Suddenly** enacts the design approach that Tom Sieverts speaks of in his article: "Of Uncertainty in Urban Planning". Using film, graphic art, writing, along with conversation, **Suddenly** designs public discourse with "images and imageable processes". It also designs in the "dimensions of nature and time" with outdoor explorations, celebratory dinners and conversation in in-between landscapes.

In dealing with the abstract, **Suddenly** stays very close to practice. According to Sieverts, these features are essential elements of socially responsible planning. In the context of **Suddenly**, they are self-organized political choices and relationships supporting a transformational mission: living well together where we live now.

**A Glimpse of Self-Organizing Leadership Patterns:**

As I've observed Matthew, Thomas, Stephanie, Michael, and Boris Sieverts (who was in the Seattle-Burien series) hosting and "on stage" in the different events and activities, I've noticed these patterns:

Each person took initiative that expressed what they loved and cared about.

Each hosted a public learning space that welcomed everyone.

Each learned in public.

Each regarded the material world from a place of caring and appreciative attention (joy?).

In the material world of in-between spaces, each engaged the in-between spiritual world of freedom and possibility through appreciative relationships and making art.

Each participated in temporary and appropriate forms for collaboration, connection, and practical action.

Each seemed to treat mistakes or surprises as opportunities for learning rather than signals of failure or unworthiness.

All seemed to keep opening their hearts and minds to what fascinated them until that flow felt complete.

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***What I am learning about self-organizing, nature, and time:***

*In the natural world:*

I'm walking along the shore at La Push at the Pacific ocean. In the bright sun, white drops spark off the backside of waves as they roll, crest and collapse. The wind from the Northeast is cold--cleansing every available crevice. I'm noticing how it rearranges the sand and the shadow patterns around stones. I realize I am watching processes of self-organizing.

I imagine being a grain of sand or a drop of water, wondering whether I would experience time any differently than I do as a walker overlooking the action. I wonder how I would experience form and motion.

I am reminded that all of life is self-organizing. What we see in nature, our built environment, the way we humans interact and create is a complex self-organizing system. From my local perspective of “now”, some elements and forms appear to be permanent and timeless, some appear transitory. From a universal perspective, all is flux and emerging.

What appear to be separate forms are simply nodes in a transitional environment. The image of a slime mold comes to mind: separate organisms until the necessity for cooperation arises, then coming together to create a fruiting body, and when that action is complete, separating again into constituent parts. Looking at the ocean: from one vantage point, it is separate drops of water; viewed from another perspective, the drops merge into a wave or body of water.

The ocean appears to me to be a complex system that has ease of access between elements; capacity for unhindered flow into appropriate forms; permeable boundaries that allow timely engagement with the whole.

As I walk the edge—the in-between space where water and sand mingle-- I’m reminded of a computer simulation of a complex system. The system started as a point of convergence that began expanding, taking up more space. As it expanded, its edges became more and more “fuzzy” and permeable. At one point the edges began to chaotically form tiny points of convergence, some of which became larger and larger, attracting more energy (“strange attractors” in the language of complexity science) until they became central points of convergence. Then one gained dominance and the whole cycle repeated itself.

I wonder if we mapped the evolution of cities and human habitation, speeding up time, whether we might not see similar patterns happening, with the pattern of our ‘in-between” contemporary

habitation being one of the normal cycles of the self-organizing complex system.

The fuzzy edges that render boundaries permeable, are the in-between spaces that **Suddenly** invites us to dwell in.

**Suddenly** enacts the natural patterns it attempts to engage. And it creates a global playground for the emergent to happen, for surprises to enter, and for oddity to bloom.

It puts us squarely in a creative relationship with the landscape, the place we call home, and invites us to pay attention, notice it, and include it in our calculations for living well.

### **How does Self-organizing appear to me/the Self?**

As myself, I experience the world on multiple levels. Consciously, I have an inner experience and an outer. I also have unconscious responses welling up that overwhelm my conscious experience at times, informing me through dreams and other means of communication. And I have trans-personal experience, usually characterized as “intuition”, in which I access the universal field of consciousness.

The title of the effort, **Suddenly**, points to the shift that happens in the human mind when a boundary of separation is breached and a new perception becomes clear. For instance, I looked upon strip malls as in-between spaces, places to be avoided and radically changed. Often I felt no one could possibly want to live or work there. Recently, I entered a cafe in a small strip mall near my home to have a Vietnamese meal. I found in that space a family serving delicious food. The space had flowers at each table, sheer curtains at the windows. Our host was the owner. His wife and mother were cooking. His children were helping out. It all felt marvelous: tasty, nourishing, welcoming...like a home.

Suddenly, I look at strip malls differently, wondering what treasures they may house, instead of looking upon them as uninhabitable.

**Suddenly** reminds us to create such shifts in our perceptions that guide our experience, to shift from separation to connection, from surviving to thriving.

***Here is my INVITATION:***

In the course of my experience with **Suddenly**, I realized that sustaining the capacity we have for thriving in a self-organizing world might be more likely if there were a practice that was not encumbered by professional or religious signifiers and dogma, one that had clarity, simplicity and usefulness no matter what the circumstances. I also realized that I was called to experiment with that, asking this question:

***Are there conscious embodied practices of Self-organizing leadership that merge my personal evolution and our collective evolution with the fire at the core of life—practices that help me and us shift from surviving to thriving: living well together where we live?***

I am now experimenting with two practices, a personal practice and a collective practice--with an eye to "less is more". I have also been observing how these practices materialize unique and different expressions.

***My personal practice: What do I do, as a node of the collective, that brings my spark of life fully present?.***

An observation: Freedom exists when my Self connects to the Self of universal consciousness. Synapse happens when that connection is present. I feel/sense "I am that!" I experience delight, deep peace & flow. Whatever I manifest practically resonates with the Self-organizing at the heart of the living Universe.

Hypothesis: My aim/intention is crucial. It lands me in exactly the consciousness I aim for. My aim: Self to Self. My fire to THE fire at the core of life.

So, I begin by dedicating each endeavor, relationship, and activity to **servicing life.**

I open my awareness to the unknown, the unnameable, so that my actions may be informed by the larger field of universal consciousness that is life...through meditation.

In meditation, I try to divest myself of all stories, preconceptions, assumptions & expectations about the situation, person, or place that I'm attached to.

I follow delight, my sense of "Yes!"

I embrace what/who I attract.

I listen.

I pay attention (observe). I notice whether I am attached to something or irritated by it, and practice releasing that in the moment.

I do/make as love/attraction/guidance calls me.

I learn.

I reflect.

I complete what I am called to do.

I give thanks and celebrate.

I'm doing this practice daily as well as in the midst of collective activities I am called to do, with the same habitual regularity as brushing my teeth.

### ***A Collective Practice:***

*"A mass of fire reaching upward from earth into the heavens is the robust, united, burning, radiant soul."Emerson*

***What are essential co-creative patterns that foster a mass of fire—the united burning, radiant soul-- leading to evolution and wholeness?***

Here are the minimal patterns and practices I, with others, have been noticing and experimenting with.

**Treat everything as a learning opportunity.**

**Start by asking a question:**

***What are we called to do here together that we cannot do separately?***

This opens me/us to the field of learning/action appropriate at this moment. It surfaces the manifestation possibility emerging from the universal intelligent field.

**Then Invite a small group of people essential to the undertaking.**

In self-organizing system, a larger group or community forms from a small group, a fractal of itself.

We focus on these questions:

1. What is the calling we're answering?
2. Who are we? What experience does each bring? What gifts?
3. Where are we?
4. What can we do together?
5. Who else needs to be here? Then WE invite and welcome a wider circle of others: extending and attracting a larger circle that reflects the "whole".

**Welcome:** (the circle of the whole)

Hosting is essential. ALL work in co-creative relationship IS a **gift exchange: I/We/Now!** The purpose of welcome and hosting is assuring people that just as they are, they belong in that circle of relationship and are essential to the well-being of all.

At the beginning of any gathering, people need to know:

1. What is the purpose of the gathering, and the question we are addressing?
2. Who am I, and am I welcome just as I am?
3. Where are we? Walk around, look, and listen to the place we are in.
4. What is the abundance that has come together?
5. What are the gifts each one is bringing?

**Exchange gifts:** What are we here to do together?

Invite each person to take responsibility for what they love & care about in relation to the purpose and calling question; either through opening a marketplace as in Open Space Technology, or via another method of self-organizing, so that people can initiate a gift exchange of inquiry and potential action.

This affords the opportunity for my evolving Self to engage with others' evolving Selves in service of the collective's evolution. It is the gift exchange that IS the root of the word "community" (From the Latin: "com", meaning "together"; "munus", meaning "gift".)

**After a period of action/exchange, reassemble** the whole circle:

**1. Converge:** What is the synthesis that this particular circle has to offer? Using all intelligences, working in small self-chosen groups, bring forth the synthesis of new knowledge that each group can offer in answering the question for which the whole circle assembled.

**2. Reflect:** What is the "aha", the transformational learning gift we each want to offer so the group can learn as a whole? What wants to happen next?

**3. Celebrate/Close:** What is the appreciating and celebrating we want to do as we close this particular chapter in the life of this particular circle?

**Observations about self-organizing leadership roles:**

My culture's habits of leadership are drawn from an experience of organizations that value hierarchy and heroic cultural myths. Most of the organizations in our public life have a pyramidal structure that came into being as the organization's entrepreneurial period gave way to the need for stability. In such a structure, roles are defined and rigidly codified; new possibilities struggle to emerge; power is centralized rather than distributed. Change is experienced as

threatening, a struggle, and destructive—to be avoided. Order and control are maintained at all costs.

***Is this way of leadership sustainable? What can we learn from natural self-organizing systems that sustain themselves?***

*In the forest on the way to Second Beach near La Push:*

I follow a path that winds among ancient trees and giant stumps. Roots upended in grotesque shapes shelter shallow caves. A cedar looms beside the trail with some of its great branches upraised to embrace both the heavens and the earth. Its roots stand tall as I am, embracing a ghostly nurse log that provided sustenance for its seed a hundred years ago.

Everything grows. Everything finds a niche. The rocks communicate an impression of permanence. The trees give impression of solidity and strength. But uncertainty is the condition of life. The tipped up root bases twenty feet across show how vulnerable these giants are to torrential storms. Mushroom spores remind us of unseen forces at work. Life and death is everywhere. Death gives rise to more life. Only my belief in the permanence of the present moment gives me the illusion of certainty.

As I observe the disorderly order of the forest, I reflect that contrary to my experience with corporate life and such organizations, there are many roles in self-organizing leadership. The one you express freely and congruently is the one that matches in any given moment, your evolutionary need **and** the evolutionary need of the group. Arnold Mindell calls this being a “time-spirit” in the group. The informal structure--the way things get done-- of any lively group reflects this. Someone shows up as the healer, someone as the teacher, someone as the joker, the mother, etc. and whoever is appropriate for that moment helps that individual and the group thrive and evolve.

Several experiences of living in an open space organization have shown me that when stewardship is vested a circle of leaders, the appropriate leaders emerge at the right time to help the group discover and do the practical work for which it came together. We saw this in Spirited Work, a seven year open space learning community of

practice, 1998—2005, (see [www.Sunyatagroup.ws](http://www.Sunyatagroup.ws), Archived Articles) and in the recent emergence of the Journalism That Matters Pacific Northwest Collaboratory ([www.jtmpnw.org](http://www.jtmpnw.org))

It is important to know and observe the place we live in, even as we are trying to sort out the human relationships to get work done. The place itself is a vital mirror and guide for how we live well and sustainably.

In organizations that are not aligned with the underlying flow of self-organizing, emergence is characterized by struggle, chaos, conflict, and imposed order. An organization that uses the co-creative practices I've identified earlier experiences ease and creative flow.

Disturbance is a navigational signal that the group or individual is out of synch with the underlying processes of Self-organizing. Thus disturbance becomes an invitation for remembering the calling and correcting the course.

### **My working hypothesis:**

In a self-organizing world, sustainable organizations are impermanent, provisional opportunities for creation and practical activity: "collaboratories", places of experimentation, co-creation and community. We can sustain our joyful participation in the complexity of our living Universe by experimenting with simple practices of co-creation in order to live well, wherever we live, with whomever we attract.

***HERE IS MY HEARTFELT INVITATION TO YOU, DEAR READER!***

***Please join me in experimenting with the patterns and practices of self-organizing I have so far identified, and share information about the practices you discover that enable us to live well where we live!***

