

# The wisdom of belonging in a time of transformative change

## Chris Chapman



*This article reflects on episodes from my journey as a change agent. I once thought that separateness and detachment were necessary for achieving a wise state of objectivity; now I have moved towards an increasing appreciation of the contributions of play, relationships and 'belonging to place' as enabling a more sustainable kind of wisdom.*

### **Key words:**

Belonging, hosting, marginality, transformation, system, complexity, wisdom

I have a friend who is a coach, with years and years of experience of providing his expertise in the corporate world. A few years ago he decided he had had enough. He summed up his feelings with the Stephen Covey quotation: "It's incredibly easy to get caught up in an activity trap, in the busyness of life, to work harder and harder at climbing the ladder of success only to discover it's leaning against the wrong wall." (Covey 1989:98) You could call it his 'wrong wall' moment: the moment when the nagging feeling of things being wrong, turns into full-blown disillusionment.

Many people these days are having their own 'wrong wall' moments, realising that our 'system' isn't making people happy, is leading to massive inequities and is running up against finite environmental limits. It is easy enough to see that the 'system' is broken, but rather more difficult to know what it would take to mend it, or what one's own contribution to that repair work might be. Even more difficult again, is to know how our 'way of being' may need to change. Wisdom, it seems to me, is required for such issues, but what might help us towards it?



### Flashback to May 2008 : The First 'Art of Hosting' training in Ireland

About 35 of us had gathered at the Glencree Peace and Reconciliation Centre in the Wicklow mountains, just to the south of Dublin.

We had planned an innocent enough check-in; something just to get us warmed up. The 'who are you' question included the prompt, "Where do you call home?" What followed was one of the most emotionally charged cathartic sessions I have experienced ... Different people said:

*'I don't really have anywhere I call home ...'*

*'I know where I come from and I know where I live, but it doesn't feel like home ...'*

*'I spend most of my time at work, but that certainly doesn't feel like a home ...'*

*'The nearest I ever get to a feeling of home is a session like this ...'*

And so it went on, tears followed. This gathering of experienced, able, change agents many of whom had travelled the world extensively, seemed largely made up of people who in general didn't feel they belonged. We aspired to help create 'community' through organisations, but at our core we lacked a sense of (?) community and belonging for ourselves.

We recognised that our travels had given us much that helped our work. We were less stuck in particular contexts than many of the people we worked with. We were able to make helpful interventions along the lines of 'it doesn't have to be this way' or 'there are other ways of looking at this, you know'. But there was also a big something missing for many of us in our lives.

### The view from the margins

In thinking about the role of an external change agent (consultant, coach, facilitator etc) in relation to an organisation, I have often referred to the concept of 'marginality' as developed by Edwin Nevis (1987). This involves a precarious balance on a boundary where you are both 'in' the group enough and 'out' of the group enough: The consultant is seen by the client as being sympathetic and comfortable while working in a system, as fitting in even though a stranger, and the consultant's differences are seen by the system as interesting or attractive.

This precarious balance requires a constant state of tension and flexibility and a high state of awareness about your own patterned needs for autonomy / affiliation and how those tend to play out. In other words, understanding how you are likely to trip yourself up and fall off the marginal boundary. Nevis refers to the necessity for 'comfort in the marginal role' to enable you "to experience a constant state of aloneness or isolation while in the midst of very engaging interactions" (Nevis 1987:181). He is less forthcoming about where we might derive such comfort from.

When we meet a client who is in the process of facing up to a realisation that their ladder has been

against the wrong wall, we are likely to have a variety of questions, including:

- How wrong is this wall? (and could I offer my services to help with the building of a new, improved version?)
- How able is the client to deal with the situation? (and could I offer training, coaching or some other intervention to help?)
- What if my ladder is against the wrong wall too? (and how do I get out of this one whilst still looking good?).

### **Fast forward to January 2012, the second Art of Hosting training is taking place in Ireland**

This time the pitch is more 'corporate'. The guiding title for the event is 'Unlocking Leadership: Moving from Silo to System' and the venue is the Burren College of Art, a unique environment of creative space set in stunning landscape, with its own four storey castle tower.

I refer back to the experience of the check-in at the 2008 event: it resonates for some and not for others. I refer too to my experience of facilitating many World Cafés, and that moment when, as a facilitator, it suddenly strikes you that what you are enabling for other people is what you yearn for someone to enable for yourself. You feel that pang for the connection that others are experiencing.

Later, I call an 'Open Space' group on the subject of the experience of the 'lonely facilitator', having to deal with the feelings of 'aleness' and 'not belonging'. It convenes on the cold, stony top floor of the castle tower. Ten people show up, 8 of whom are men (in a workshop where women outnumber men two to one!)

After a period of silent reflection, we check in with personal experiences that led to us feeling drawn to the conversation. We notice how generally we don't tend to talk about our vulnerabilities in this kind of a way, how most of the time we feel the need to project ourselves as secure, maybe even expert. Conversation flows. It is good to talk. We move on to wondering about the people who didn't opt for this conversation. We notice how some of them are people who very definitely 'belong' and feel their belonging to place or community strongly. We wonder also if some just don't want to be in touch with their discomfort.

We are particularly inspired by Mary Hawkes-Greene, the President of the Burren College of Art<sup>1</sup> and a participant of the course. Mary had founded the College in 1993 with her husband Michael, to give student artists the opportunity to develop their creative potential. The College had developed work around creativity and also leadership and is deeply embedded and full of integrity in living that work in its community and landscape. Mary certainly belongs and is part of a collective group that seeks to provide support and safety for each other and others.



Burren College of Art

### **The feeling of belonging**

In the evolution of change agency, it seems to me that we have witnessed some progression from it generally being about external experts diagnosing and prescribing (i.e. telling people what they should do). Some of us have moved on, through a wandering phase where someone in a more facilitative role creates a container / space where conditions for 'transformation' may be present. (Even so, if we are honest, transformative potential is often not sustained, as systems revert to 'type' at the earliest opportunity, particularly as the facilitator goes off elsewhere!). Finally, when all our wanderings cease, we arrive at a more rooted stage, where people get to feel a sense of 'coming home' and where belonging comes again to the fore.

My experience of this progression is that the change agent shifts from defining their identity as being 'other', to a deeper connection (albeit from the margins), and thence to a still deeper connection - a belonging.

### **A felt sense of wisdom**

This belonging involves both our experience of being part of a system (whether or not we are part of a defined organisation) and feeling that the system makes sense to us. As our sense of belonging increases, our 'wisdom' is increasingly a felt sense – we 'just know' what fits and what is right, we have a connection to something deeper, even if we don't necessarily have all the maps and theories we might want in an ideal world to back us up. There is that feeling of primary knowing.

There is a risk here of what might be regarded from a Gestalt perspective as 'confluence', what

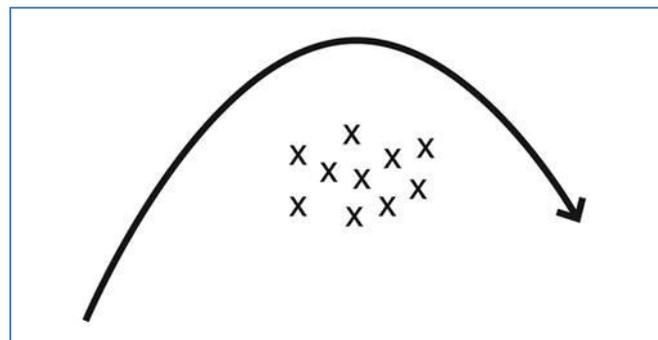
someone once described as a 'spacey' feeling, rather than a 'spacious' one. I think we are still learning how these things can come together – spaciousness, belonging, wisdom and our sense of personal agency.

### **Walking wisdom: the Two Loops model**

A lovely 'coming together' moment came last year, building on an approach that I think is both wise and evokes wisdom. With Davie Philips (a founder of the first eco-village in Ireland and advocate for growing resilience in communities) and Deborah Frieze, (co-author with Margaret (Meg) Wheatley of *Walk Out, Walk On – A Learning Journey into Communities Daring to Live the Future Now* 2011) I co-hosted a 'Deep Dive Learning Adventure'. I share here the approach, used by Deborah and Meg. This was a 'Two Loops' model that gives a map of one way in which transformative change can happen and move to scale. It is based on experience from seven communities around the world where people have *walked out* of limiting beliefs and assumptions and *walked on* to create healthy and resilient communities. The map is proving really useful for helping to identify key change agent roles in these complex and uncertain times, as growing numbers of people want to move to a better ladder placed against the correct wall, one to which they can feel they belong.

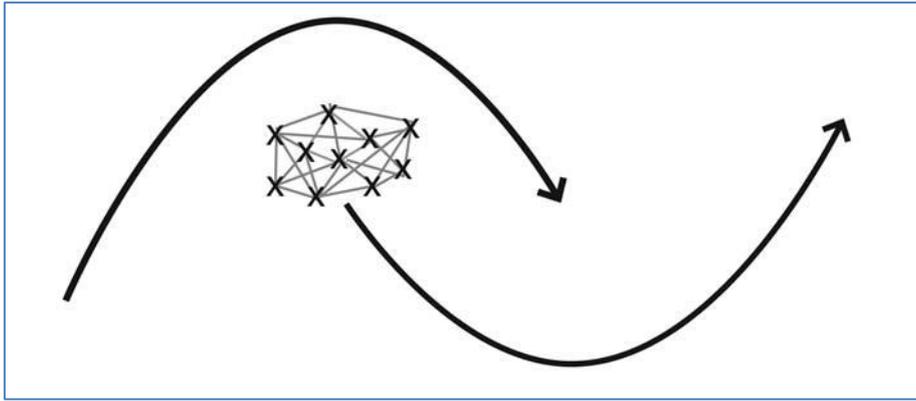
#### **Walk Outs**

As old systems fall, a few people walk out. They walk on to experiment with new ways of thinking and organising that enable them to find solutions to seemingly unsolvable problems. At first, they feel isolated and alone, limited in what they can achieve. They often don't realise there are other *Walk Outs*.



#### **Walk Ons**

*Walk Ons* find each other and connect. Together, they learn quickly, take greater risks, and support one another to continue their pioneering work. A new system is born from their efforts.



The Two Loops Model (from Wheatley and Frieze 2011)

## Distinctions

In our Deep Dive Learning Adventure, we explored together four of the key distinctions from the Frieze & Wheatley book. These are; four of the movements that people growing healthy resilient communities seem to make as they move from one loop to the other:

***From Power to Play*** – using play to evoke passion, creativity and motivation

***From Problem to Place*** – using a systems principle of ‘start anywhere, follow it everywhere’

***From Efficiency to Resilience*** – small local actions growing the capacity to adapt in an unpredictable and often chaotic world

***From Hero to Host*** – no longer waiting for a hero to save us and instead using conversational processes to address complex problems

In a ‘whole system’ approach, these movements may occur concurrently or in any order.

Combining the four ‘end states’, we arrived at the idea of ‘hosts’ enabling us to ‘play’ in real ‘places’ (places being either geographical localities or organisations), as we grow ‘resilience’ together. The learning and insights felt very powerful. The focus on play, relationships and real places takes away a lot of the pressure that comes from working with incredibly serious issues and trying to grapple with what can be heavy and over-whelming concepts, as we try continually to engage with systemic complexity and chaos. Play, relationships and places feel like critical ingredients of achieving belonging and accessing a deeper wisdom.

## Sustaining ourselves for wiser work

In their work with the Berkana Institute, Deborah, Meg and others have identified four simple practices through which we might sustain ourselves as change agents in this changing world, enabling us to contribute to wider change via the second loop:

***Naming*** – using language to make visible our intentions and how we want to identify ourselves

***Connecting*** – finding others who share our purpose, relieving our potential loneliness and creating the conditions for co-creation

***Nourishing*** – turning to one another for ideas, knowledge, practices and dreams

***Illuminating*** – sharing our stories so that many more people can know we’re out there and can join in

Between the loops, there also lies another transformative change agent role. This is commonly referred to as ‘midwifing’ - the enabling of the bringing forth of the new into the world, which is real work at Nevis’s precarious boundary. The ‘Deep Dive’ gave us the opportunity to play with these roles, to consider where we felt comfortable and not so comfortable. It also led to one of those

stunning 'a-ha' moments, a sudden realisation that 'midwives don't deliver their own babies'. How often do we try and deliver transformative change in a system when we are part of what needs to be delivered and transformed? Whilst we can get carried away with metaphors, it does seem useful to be clear whether we perceive ourselves as midwife, mother, father or baby!

For change agents who accept that their role is to contribute to a societal changing of ladders or walls (and possibly even the delivery of 'babies'), the identification of these roles feels very significant. None of us has to be stuck to one role, but these are the roles that will enable individual acts of 'walking out' to aggregate into societal transformation – the movement to a society where people collaborate for a greater good of happier lives that can be sustained within environmental limits. For many of us, our maps are changing and things are looking very different.

*"We consultants are guided to undergo a death of ego, an initiation in which we let go of our ideas of who we are, what we do and how we do it. Much of our work in the world is upside down and backwards, it is work for short-term gain that will cost us dearly down the road." (Roger Harrison 1987)*

Everything is work in progress. 'We consultants' are learning about life on a new ladder (or loop, if the image pleases you more). We are not 'doing' change to the world, we are learning to belong. We are uncovering what are to us new ways of being and, as we do, we are beginning to access what to us are new forms of wisdom. (I suspect for others the wisdom is very old indeed).

### **Reflections from writing this brief article**

My intention in writing this article was to use some of my personal experiences to prompt readers to reflect on their own personal experiences and perspectives on wisdom. It is an interesting place from which to try to write – not pretending that I have the wisdom to know everything there is to know about a subject, but suspecting I have found some key points that might be openings to other places for some people.

Questions that I would like to explore further with more change agents include: How do you experience belonging? Does your way of being a change agent recognise that you are a part of a system? Do your needs for autonomy and affiliation get in the way of you accessing wisdom that could contribute to greater sustainability? These are the kinds of questions that it feels we are just beginning to open up, possible cracks in our current systems that may lead us to new places and new wisdom.

In writing the article, I notice that I had wanted to make links to more feminine forms of wisdom and haven't quite dared to go there – maybe next time or maybe a job for someone else. I think there is a bit of a tradition of male writers (and leaders) getting excited about things (such as emotional intelligence, relationship, intuition and belonging) that many women have known a lot about for many years!

I am intrigued that acknowledging our individual vulnerabilities seems to be a critical step on the path to deeper forms of wisdom and how reluctant many of us are to go down that path - a masculine /

feminine thing going on there, I think.

I believe we need more places where we can be real about our vulnerabilities in order for more of us to access deeper wisdoms.

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## Notes

For more information regarding the content and underlying philosophy of Art of Hosting trainings, see [www.artofhosting.org](http://www.artofhosting.org) and / or [www.berkana.org](http://www.berkana.org)

For further information regarding Burren College of Art, please see [www.burrencollege.ie](http://www.burrencollege.ie)

For further resources, including videos regarding 'Walk Out Walk On', see [www.walkoutwalkon.net](http://www.walkoutwalkon.net) and <http://vimeo.com/17907928>

## About the author

Chris Chapman is a change agent originally from London, now based in Ireland. In 2007, he completed an MSc in Change Agent Skills and Strategies at the University of Surrey. He is a serial initiator of events that seek to bring diverse people together to make new connections and to collaborate and be nourished in the context of the challenges we face today. Much of his working life, he has been intensely lonely, feeling like he is the only one that thinks like that. In terms of his personal psychology, he finds this an easy place to go. He doesn't see that he needs to go there much more and is keen to have more experiences of belonging.

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