



Synchronicity: a post-structuralist guide to creativity and change

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Abstract *Synchronicity was coined by Jung in 1955 to refer to the meaningful and acausal, or chance, correlation between an inner and outer event. Insofar as creativity is dependent upon chance for novelty, then creativity and synchronicity may have a supportive relationship. This paper uses narrative to explore the role of paradox in meaning, in chance, and in creativity. The nature of synchronicity, the relationship between synchronicity and creativity, and the implications of this relationship for management are discussed. Such implications include encouraging multiple points of view, understanding the role of emotion in creativity, allowing for movement across metaphorical and physical boundaries, honoring the body, and maintaining a lightness (with humor and joy) with which to adapt to inevitable "accidents".*

Introduction

In this invitation to contribute our thoughts, theories, and observations on the ideas of C.G. Jung, I am emboldened to discuss *synchronicity*, a term coined by Jung to refer to the meaningful and acausal correlation between an inner and outer event, or a meaningful coincidence (Jung, 1955). Jung (1955) himself resisted writing about synchronicity for years, due to the "difficulties of the problem and its presentation," finally doing so after his "experiences of the phenomenon of synchronicity multiplied themselves over the decades" (Jung, 1955, p. 5). One of these experiences was with a bug:

One of my patients has a dream in which someone had given her a beautiful scarab, a costly piece of jewelry. While she is telling me this dream, a large insect starts tapping on the window, in an obvious effort to get into the dark room. I open the window and catch the bug: it is a gold-green bug that closely resembles the scarab in the woman's dream. I hand the beetle to the patient, saying, "Here is your scarab." She opens to the arational, and becomes open to change and healing.

Another is with a fox:

I am walking with a woman patient in the wood, when she starts to tell me about an important dream about a fox coming downstairs in her parents' home. At this moment, a real fox comes out of the trees not forty yards away and walks quietly on the path ahead of us for several minutes, as if a partner in the situation.

A third is with a dream and a research project:

I am investigating the non-linear psychological development of the self, and I have a dream about a well-fortified golden castle. I am painting this image in the center of a mandala when I receive *The Secret of the Golden Flower* from Richard Wilhelm with a request to write a



commentary on it. This text confirms my ideas about the mandala and the circumambulation of the center. Also, Richard Wilhelm's book describes the picture I am drawing: the yellow castle is the germ of the immortal body. This is a great synchronicity for me.

I, too, developed an interest in synchronicity as my experiences with coincidences grew more numerous and meaningful. Synchronicity is narrative; it grows out of the paradox of our own life story: changing and timeless, unique and mythic, subject and object, inner and outer, part and whole (Hopke, 1997):

Each of our lives is a story, and synchronistic events call our attention to the structure of the story . . . Those unique coincidences which we call synchronistic make us aware, again and again, of the beauty, order, and connectedness of the tales we are living (pp. 13-14).

Synchronicity is paradoxical. Related to the word "synchronize," there is an element of meaningful coordination of events in time: synchronized swimming, for example, indicates planning and implies a creative or choreographic act. On the other hand, related to "synchronic," synchronistic events exist at one point in time without reference to history. Synchronicity points up the paradox of time, and therefore of change: it is both continuous and discontinuous. This paper explores the nature of synchronicity and the ways in which synchronicity may play a part in meaningful change. In particular, the relationship between synchronicity and creativity is highlighted.

Synchronicity supports creative interactions between self and world. It highlights the unique and the mythic. With synchronicity, meaning is more than a cognition; it is a physical and emotional charge resulting from an experience of the force uniting inner and outer reality. Beyond understanding in causal terms, synchronicity is an archetypal experience of meaning, and meaningfulness, from the "inside out." The synchronicities in my own life and in the life of my loved ones have been very meaningful. In this paper I use my own life to address the following three questions: What is synchronicity? How are synchronicity and creativity related? What are synchronicity's lessons for change management? Interweaving my own story with that of this text is metaphorical for the lessons of synchronicity: the joining together of self and world.

Q1: what is synchronicity?

What synchronicity *means* has been the subject of speculation for some time, its acausal nature makes it a challenge for traditional research methods, and its phenomenological roots (individual meaning) make adequate sample sizes problematic. Still, in my life, synchronicity has contributed to a sense of hope, of appropriateness, of being "in the right place at the right time," and of unity with a larger wholeness. These feelings fuel my interest in understanding the phenomenon and my hope to share it with those at the heart of modern culture, people at work.

Synchronicity is a connecting principle (when cause and effect are eliminated by the impossibility of any rational explanation) between our psyches and an external event, in which we feel an uncanny sense of inner and outer being linked. In the experience of a synchronistic event, instead of feeling ourselves to be separated and isolated entities in a vast

world we feel the connection to others and the universe at a deep and meaningful level (Bolen, 1979, pp. 23-4).

At the heart of any investigation into synchronicity is the nature of chance, in counterpoint to the dominant paradigm of causality (Jung, 1955). One cannot predict the occurrence of chance (Hyde, 1998); it embodies uncertainty, which is of serious concern to change managers (Milliken, 1987; Thompson, 1977) as they consider the environment (Fry, 1982; Hrebiniak and Joyce, 1985; Nightengale and Toulouse, 1977; Van de Ven and Drazin, 1985) and prefer change initiatives that guarantee results. Contingency, too, falls under the domain of chance. Organizations, like cultures, “regularly suffer from contingency; they bump into things they do not expect and cannot control” (Hyde, 1998, p. 105). Because synchronicity is, by definition, meaningful, interpretation of those contingencies is an important variable. An important part of synchronicity, therefore, is a willingness to imagine that the events in our life may not be separate from us. Synchronistic experiences give us a clue that the environment may not be totally “other.” Our perception of the environment in turn affects the decisions we make (Sawyer, 1990; Jackson and Dutton, 1988).

Cameron’s (1992, p. 3) book, *The Artist’s Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity*, posits “an underlying, in-dwelling creative force infusing all of life – including ourselves”. Cameron argues that dedicating oneself to creativity leads to synchronicity, which she equates with answered prayers. However, answered prayers can be scary; they may require that we follow up on our creative urges.

Editing dissertations and raising three children, I still find a little time to do workbook and journal exercises in *The Artist’s Way* and so I begin to imagine what creative path my life could take. One of my clients tells me that I need to meet his management professor – that the guy is a guru. Then I get a phone call from another management professor asking me to edit some journal articles. I tell this professor that I am thinking about going into management, and the next thing I know I am talking to the graduate coordinator, who offers me a position and a thousand dollars a month.

Synchronicity has two qualities or direction of interpretation: outward and inward. The outward direction is better known as serendipity, discussed by McCall and Bobko (1990) in Volume I of Dunnette and Hough’s (1990) *Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*: the making of fortunate discoveries by accident. Serendipity, or “happy accidents” led to such diverse creations as penicillin, electro-magnetism, and medications for diabetes (McCall and Bobko, 1990; Goswami, 1999). However, serendipity is related to synchronicity through more than just its accidental character, more than the intrusion of an empirical “outer” event onto another, such as the landing of the penicillin mold onto a petri dish in Fleming’s laboratory while he was on vacation. Like synchronicity, serendipity involves the mind, through “sagacity” or preparedness of mind (McCall and Bobko, 1990): a prepared mind “has a kind of openness, holding its ideas lightly, and willing to have them exposed to impurity and the unintended” (Hyde, 1998, p. 140). Synchronicity is the

meaningful and acausal coincidence of two events, one inner and one outer. Fleming's ability to interpret the implications, the meaning of the presence of bacteria on all surfaces except the petri dish, did not cause the wind to blow bacteria in, nor vice-versa. It was the co-occurrence in proximal time of the two incidents that led to the discovery of penicillin.

I'm in the Peace Corps in Nicaragua, and one of my friends invites me to join him on his trip to visit our friends who are in Honduras because they got evacuated from their northern Nicaragua sites when the fighting got too rough there. I tell him I'm not coming, but the next day I go anyway. We arrive in Tegucigalpa, wondering where our friends are. Hungry, we stop in a restaurant, and there are the friends. Also, the next morning we learn that a rebel attack in Nicaragua closed the borders just behind us.

The other aspect of synchronicity, in addition to its outer-oriented serendipity, is symbolic: the meaning of the event. Symbols bridge the inside to the outside and hold the key to creativity (Deri, 1984). The inner-directed dimension of synchronicity emphasizes the meaningfulness of the co-occurrence. What is in one's mind is reflected in outer events, though neither causes the other. Synchronistic events take place in time, and have a different temporal "directionality" from "normal" occurrences. As causality refers from the past to the present, so synchronicity seems to refer from the present to the future.

The experience of synchronicity is numinous: a "nod from the Gods" (Von Franz, 1992, p. 21) that we are on the right path. It is hopeful and deeply personal. In the above story of my exodus from Nicaragua, I had the strong sense that I was "meant to be" out of harm's way. A common theme to synchronicity narratives is this sense of receiving support and guidance. For example, Jaworski (1996) made the commitment to quit his lucrative law practice and create a leadership institute: "Things began falling into place almost effortlessly – unforeseen incidents and meetings with the most remarkable people who were to provide crucial assistance to me" (p. 135). At such times it feels as if hidden hands are helping you, as if you are living the life that you ought to be (Joseph Campbell, cited in Jaworski, 1996).

Synchronicity has an effect without a cause. It is located in time, but it is discontinuous. Being alert to synchronicity means being open to paradox. Rather than believing that the role of research is to eliminate paradox in order to assure control, Handy (1994, p. 13) now sees paradox as inevitable and perfection as "neither possible nor, perhaps, desirable" (p. 13). Similarly, Wolf (1989, p. 205), in *Taking the Quantum Leap*, claims that "the world is already paradoxical and fundamentally uncertain". Also paradoxical is the meaningful link between the inner and outer world. Usually, person (or organization) and environment are assumed to be distinct. Synchronicity feels like a unity between them. The boundary areas between two distinct categories are often "ambiguous in implication and a source of conflict and anxiety" (Leach, 1976, p. 34).

The paradoxical structure of the world as suggested by synchronicity can be imagined as two circles, each containing exclusive contents, such as my thoughts and the world (see Figure 1).

When one experiences a synchronistic event, it is as if the normal categories that make up “reality” are challenged. Synchronicity is, therefore, not only acausal but also post-structural; it is the meaningful experience of the deconstruction of the essentialism of the categories of inner and outer. In this way, the previously firm categories become blurry, ambiguous, even threatened. And given the fundamental assumptions about “in-ness” and “out-ness” in our culture, challenging those categories is a destabilizing maneuver to other cultural categories as well. Taking coincidence seriously is a way of altering, of creative changing, of the world:

Cultural categories shape this world, and whoever manages to change the categories thus changes the shape. One kind of creative perception is always willing to take coincidence seriously and weave it into the design of things (Hyde, 1998, p. 99).

Synchronicity, then, is located in the ambiguous boundary zone, and is therefore sacred, taboo, or both (Leach, 1976). This feeling of the presence of the sacred is a powerful emotion, and thus an important aid to the solving of impossible dilemmas, because emotionality draws energy away from established rational patterns and allows creative contents from the unconscious realm to seep into awareness (Jung, 1955). Setting paradoxical goals, such as the union of opposites or the resolution of opposing forces, has “an emotional effect right from the start, since [such goals] postulate something unknowable as being potentially knowable and in that way take the possibility of a miracle seriously into account” (Jung, 1955, p. 35).

Creativity is paradoxical, and therefore often sacred or taboo; many aspects of creativity challenge either/or thinking. Origin stories are located in sacred myths worldwide. “The Creator” *means* the divine, eternal being or phenomena. In Newtonian science, in which for every effect there had to be a known cause (and vice-versa), the ‘hand of God’ had set the machine in motion eons ago, and no one could stop it” (Wolf, 1989, p. 44); therefore, it was off-limits for scientists to question the deterministic assumption. Doing so would challenge the sacred limits within which all phenomena exist.

I was introduced to the overlapping circles in a critical theory class. The teacher explained how the area of overlap was, according to Leach, either sacred or taboo, and he gave examples of the culturally taboo mixing of categories – racial, sexual, class. I wondered what an example of the sacred would be. Within a few days, I found an answer to my question in a book I’d inherited from my dad, entitled *Owning Your Own Shadow*. In it, Johnson (1991) explained that in addition to the mandala, a sacred circle figure, there is a spiritual tradition of

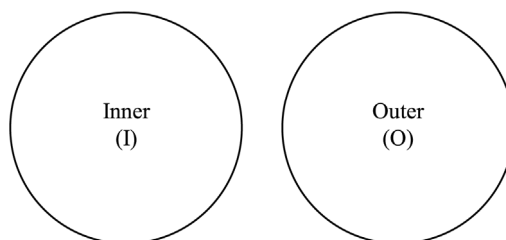


Figure 1.
Discrete categories:
inner (my thoughts) and
outer (the world)

the mandorla, an almond shaped segment at the intersection of two circles: “Generally, the mandorla is described as the overlap of heaven and earth” (Johnson, 1991, p. 99).

Change is a sacred event; it creates a new kind of self (see Figure 2).

Q2: how are synchronicity and creativity related?

May (1959, p. 3) defines creativity as “the encounter of the intensively conscious human being with his world” and “the process of bringing something new into being” (p. 37), and does not restrict creativity to artists, but includes scientists, thinkers, and “captains of modern technology” (p. 38) among those who create. It “entails a holistic involvement in a process that is highly complex, deeply meaningful to the person, usually prolonged, and demanding” (Policastro and Gardner, 1999, p. 214). Woodman *et al.* (1993) define creativity for individuals and organizations as “doing something for the first time anywhere or creating new knowledge” (p. 293). Most definitions of creativity have the components of being novel and useful, and often involve the synthesis or merging of previously separate concepts (Ward *et al.*, 1999). The usefulness implies a continuity, a fit of some kind, with the surrounding domain. “Creativity occurs when a person makes a change in a domain, a change that will be transmitted through time” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999, p. 315).

Creativity is not only part of “outer” domains, such as the arts or sciences or industry; it is also at play in the “inner” dimensions. Creativity plays various roles in thought and speech formation (Ward *et al.*, 1999), and in stories (Murphy, 1997). Creativity, like synchronicity, is both/and. Both formal art and everyday efforts (such as home improvement projects on a tiny budget, publicity campaigns, and/or nurturing a child) “include glimmers of pleasure, progress, and achievement along the way, as well as a sense of fitness, elegance, or beauty” (Richards, 1999, p. 202). Creativity, like synchronicity, is surprising, dependent on chance. Only in the accidental convergence of two previously unrelated phenomena can true novelty emerge: “absolute chance produces absolute newness” (Hyde, 1998, p. 120). Further, combining cunning and skill yields “smart luck,” the combining of inner and outer events.

Synchronicity and creativity both require humility, an acknowledgment that the world is “always larger and more complicated than our cosmologies” (Hyde, 1998, p. 140), and both flourish with and support a sense of humor. Mental and emotional levity, an appreciation for the tragicomic, open-mindedness and a playful disposition, all of these support the paradoxes of synchronicity and

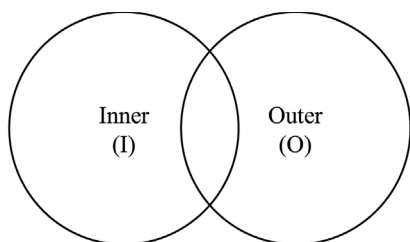


Figure 2.
Problematic constructs

creativity. Synchronicity and creativity are artistic; the artist is expressive of and impressionable by (Neumann, 1989) a sense of the deep connectedness of our human existence with the totality of the world. This is akin to love (Collins and Amabile, 1999, p. 297) and to the experience of relationship (Neumann, 1989). While involved in the creative process, the creator experiences a deep involvement with, or absorption into, the world (May, 1959). Creativity, as is synchronicity, is holistic, complex, deeply meaningful, and intensely involving (Policastro and Gardner, 1999). Both are hopeful; without hope what would be the point of investing the necessary time and energy to bring forth a creation to completion (Deri, 1984).

Both synchronicity and creativity require preparation and surrender: for example, a jazz musician needs to have “prior knowledge, performance traditions, and music theory,” in order to spontaneously improvise (Hatch, 1997, p. 185). “Creative achievement is always at once individual and anonymous; it involves a high degree of alertness and the capacity to be overwhelmed” (Neumann, 1989, p. 115). Creation requires destruction (Hyde, 1998): it builds on familiar phenomena (Weisberg, 1999), but it also negates what was known and familiar, and makes its appearance as something unfamiliar (Hausman, 1984). The creative individual needs to have the knowledge, skills, and abilities that come with time sensitive training and experience, but also benefits from the playful open-mindedness of a child (Amabile, 1983, cited in Policastro and Gardner, 1999).

Creativity is empirical, and it is symbolic (Deri, 1984). Creativity gives birth to something from something, where previously there was nothing (May, 1959). To finish this suggestive list of the paradox of creativity, let me propose that a key paradox is the embodiment of the a historical, by this I mean the abstract and timeless, into time. A finite bit of mind/body stuff (such as paint and canvas, ink on paper, movement on a stage, color on a billboard, flowchart on a diagram, etc.) points to something beyond itself – to the timeless. Both synchronicity and creativity indicate a union of the timeless with the empirical stuff of life; both hint at the presence of eternity in a single moment.

I want to study synchronicity and so I go to the library looking for a measure for the meaningfulness. I read mention of one, but I can't find it. On a whim, I decide to look up a certain citation, and finding it, I flip back to the previous article, which has the measure I'm looking for. I later heard this kind of synchronicity is called the Library Angel.

An important aspect of it is the role of the body, of embodiment, in the generative process. The metaphor of “birth” proposed by May (1959) is not simply abstract – it reflects the fundamental relationship of matter – from the Latin *mater* for “mother” to the creative process. If our minds and our emotions are involved, and if creativity, like synchronicity, is a paradoxical, boundary-crossing process, then it is likely that the body, mind, and emotions interact in creativity. Not only physiological arousal of heartbeat and breath (May, 1959), an indicator of a creative life is the subjective experience of “feeling at home in one’s skin,” as well as in the world (Deri, 1984, p. 4). Hyde (1998) refers to the central role of “appetite” in creativity: it is our physical impulses and instincts

that lead us into unpredictable situations, and to opportunities for creativity. Sandford (1977) explains that the dog, which is largely guided by senses and instincts, can be a useful symbol for our own infra-rational urges that come from the body's intelligence.

I am studying in a carrel on the second floor of the library. I never study there. On impulse, I stand up. Wondering whether I'm thirsty, I walk toward and then past the water fountain, and on into the stacks. There I find a friend I've been wondering about, since I knew she'd moved and I didn't have her new phone number.

Or, a more dramatic story of body wisdom:

Just at dismissal time, hail and blustery winds blow in. The two younger boys run in from their carpool ride. We need to go pick up the oldest from a friend's house. But first I need to lie down for a very little while. Pretty soon, I jump up, hurry Luke and Will into the car, and drive down the street. Just a few hundred yards away, I see an emergency vehicle driving slowly in the opposite direction, and I see the two guys in there looking at me weird. Then I see leaves and limbs on the road. "Looks like a tornado came through here" I joke to myself. Less than a mile further, just as we are pulling into our friends' driveway, the tornado sirens go off. There was a tornado that crossed that road just before we got there, and we got to the neighbors and joined our oldest son just before we'd have been required to take cover.

Q3: how can management benefit from synchronicity?

Synchronicity, trickster-like, crosses boundaries, as does the innovation process (Kanter, cited in Williams and Yang, 1999). It equally acknowledges and unites differences: "The greater the intensity of the opposition, the richer the possibilities of the enframed range of meaning" (Hausman, 1984, p. 109). Consider the following examples of paradoxical combinations, innovative products and processes, from the management literature: knowledge navigator, artificial intelligence, virtual reality, controlled chaos (Hill and Levenhagen, 1995); planning as learning, leader as steward (Senge, 1990); Honda's theory of automobile evolution, and Matsushita's human electronics (Nonaka, 1991); external leadership of self-managed teams (Manz and Sims, 1987); even organizational learning (Weick and Westley, 1996). In this way, looking at something as if it *is* what it *is not* can lead to insight, or at least can prepare the mind to be ready for the accidents that intrude on the ways that things are. Some suggestions for playing with paradox would be to not only define what something is, but also to be clear about what something is not, and then to take steps to encourage both. That is, if you want self-managed teams, externally manage them (Manz and Sims, 1987). If you want income, be philanthropic. If you want material goods, encourage a spiritual orientation; if you want spirituality, appreciate the material world.

A second implication for management that comes from synchronicity is the value of narrative. Voice and participation include an appreciation for the stories that individuals can bring. To story our lives with an emphasis on the synchronistic events in them is to open those lives to the power of the self, the archetype beyond paradox. Reflecting on one's own story is an act of creation: "In the wide sense, each individual biography is the sum total of a person's creative activities; it is his or her personal 'work of art'" (Deri, 1984, p. 4). The

“meaning” that organizational change managers look for may be found in the lives, in the unexpected coincidences, of organizational members. In a workplace setting, meaningfulness is not only motivational (Hackman and Oldham, 1975) but also central to interpretation and strategy. Creative adaptations to the environment may be cued by synchronistic events.

What we observe is largely guided by what we look for (Cameron, 1992; Wolf, 1989). Inviting synchronicity stories encourages a sense of support and thus of hope, a necessary ingredient for the investment of time and energy into creativity (Deri, 1984). Telling our stories, especially those where we relay our chance or accidental experiences, may challenge the “powers that be” if there is preference for control. However, paradoxically, true control may rely on the admission of alternative points of view. As Johnson (1991, p. 115) suggests, “If one has a statement to make, it is good to invite another statement – [generally one from the opposing point of view] – and thus make a mandorla that is greater than either point of view alone”. Similarly, management change agents reconsider their role, shifting from attempts to factor out chance occurrences to the encouragement of “unexpected and presumably unrelated effects” (McCall and Bobko, 1990, p. 385). Crawford (1964, pp. 39, 88) observed that “great fortunes are made in the financial world by seeing significance”; “thousands of discoveries might be made if people would take the trouble to sense what is going on before them”.

I would be remiss if I did not mention the dangers of the misuse of synchronicity. Overreliance on chance risks fatalism, and the sense of being supported, if overdone, can lead to self-aggrandizement or hubris. A belief in the theoretical holism of totality risks totalitarianism. Even synchronicity is subject to the principle of paradox; it both is and is not. This paper takes the hopeful stance that playing with the possibility of synchronicity, by inviting stories about meaningful coincidences, organizations can support creativity, including creative management of change and creative changing of management.

When, in fields as diverse as physics and the biological sciences, it finds hints that the existence of a true chance is more and more likely, although it is veiled behind the appearances that are the only things to which we have access, science asks us to take this perspective into account . . . It is for me to choose whether I can live with it in stoicism, in despair, or in joy, knowing that no power in the world can dictate this choice. To those who choose joy, however, science offers this important comfort: that insofar as chance has an intrinsic creative power, their choice perhaps not only is dictated by instinct or the principle of pleasure but corresponds to a coherent vision of the world (Lestienne, 1998, p. 161).

To gain the greatest benefit of the prepared mind it is, paradoxically perhaps, important to honor the body. Spacious, safe, comfortable environments, containing resources with which to play and to interact with one another and with the world, are likely to be conducive to creativity and to happy coincidences. Synchronicity, by definition, is a *meaningful* coincidence, so creating an environment that supports the body can increase the meaningfulness of work. Freedom to explore or to rest, support for following

one's physical instincts, opportunities for *recreation*, all can facilitate synchronicity and creativity. Synchronistic "gifts" occur "when we ourselves are at or near boundaries or are experiencing transition states" (Combs and Holland, 1996, p. 84). Such transition states can occur during meditation; perhaps having places for employees to rest or to meditate can increase synchronicity and creativity. Other boundary-crossing activities include "traveling, especially by public transportation," which increases the opportunities for chance encounters with others, or with books or articles, etc. (Combs and Holland, 1996). It may be useful to have organizational members move about freely, to conferences or even to public spaces such as libraries or museums. Major life transitions are often the occasion for synchronistic events (Combs and Holland, 1996; Hopcke, 1997); there may be a way to honor personal passages, such as midlife or widowhood or becoming a parent or grandparent. Rituals, too, can enact passages and so can create an environment where synchronicity and creativity are supported.

In conclusion, this paper explored the creative implications of noticing and narrating experiences that challenge the traditional notions of meaning. Acausal, meaningful coincidences have the potential to transform accepted boundaries between what is and what is not, and therefore to guide the passage of changing from one state to the other. Bridging the boundary between inner self (including at the organizational level) and outer world (the environment) allows for creative, meaningful changes in products and processes. Paradox and accidents, while inevitably fraught with tension and uncertainty, can be approached with joy and acceptance. In this way, it is proposed, organizations and individuals can learn from one another and from the environment how to consciously co-create our world.

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