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The Least Qualified Among Us:

Listening for the Wisdom in the Group

Pattern Stories: How They Came to Be

"I became enchanted with the stories and images revealed in the dozens of interviews we gathered—the details of an interaction, the honesty and depth of a speaker's voice, the courage to speak about ideas not yet fully formed. In these collective stories I saw patterns, often involving an unexpected turn of events, a transformation, a healing, a clarity that spirit can be made manifest in action. Was it possible to reflect the whole by linking together excerpts from a subgroup of the interviews we gathered? I began with a story that I thought was immensely engaging, wise, and grounded in social reality. Then I began to search my mind for a second tale that could follow this first one and also take us in new directions. I would sit imagining the effect each story might have on a reader and what new riches might be found in the next tale. My role became that of weaver and guide into material that together demonstrated the range and depth of the field of collective intelligence. I found myself hoping that the readers might experience an emotional resonance with the material, even a heightened sense of themselves as part of a larger community of seekers and mystics."

—Alan Briskin

The year is 1966. The grape fields of California are ablaze with conflict and tension. Cesar Chavez and his fledgling United Farm Workers are seeking negotiations through collective bargaining elections with the DiGiorgio Corporation—the largest grower of table grapes in the nation. Many new workers are frightened, already indentured by the company who paid their way from Mexico and now living in DiGiorgio's labor camps. They support their brothers and sisters in the United Farm Workers who are seeking a better life but they have children to feed and have no passage home.

The farm labor camps, row on row of cinder block housing, are located on company property. There are watchtowers overlooking the camps, silent reminders of earlier days when the Japanese were interred in these same buildings during World War II. There are no longer guards in the towers but there are guards at the gates. Because the camps are on private property, United Farm Worker organizers have been barred from entry—barred from engaging in conversations with the workers inside—barred from discussing the workers' democratic rights under the law to vote for the United Farm Workers to represent them in conversations with the growers. A paradox—workers have the right to vote in the first election in agricultural history but not the means to share in the conversation needed to make an informed choice on behalf of a better life for themselves and their families.

What to do? Cesar Chavez and farm worker organizers are on the roadside at 5 AM as the trucks leave for the fields, passing small informational leaflets through the slats of the trucks. The growers have permitted informational leafletting.

Even Cesar is beginning to lose hope. He calls a meeting of the whole community. Men, women, children...the farm worker meeting hall is full. The mood is somber. Cesar explains the situation to those gathered, realistically, honestly, without artifice.

Cesar says he has no answer to the dilemma. If there is no way to engage in conversation with the workers in the camps, it will be hard to change our future, he says. He asks for their honest assessment, for ideas, for help. All bearing witness know that some unforeseen breakthrough is the only way through.

People share ideas, many ideas. None are rejected. Everyone is asked not to debate because no decision is going to be made tonight. We are trying to listen, he says, listen to every voice that wants to be heard.

Many voices enter the conversation. The meeting is nearly done. Way in the back of the hall sits an old woman wrapped in a *rebozo*, a Mexican shawl. She stands and speaks quietly in Spanish.

"Well, I know I am not qualified, but there was something...I had an idea, maybe just a small idea, but maybe it can help. If we can't go in to visit the workers, maybe there is a way they could come to us. I believe only God can help us now. Why don't we build an altar, a small church on the public roadway across the street from the camps. We can hold Mass and a prayer vigil every night. I know there are priests who will help us. The workers can come across the street to the Mass and the prayer vigil. The growers can't stop them from coming to a prayer vigil, can they? And they can't stop us

from holding one, can they? And as we pray together with the workers from the camps, they will come to know who we are and what we stand for and then they can vote in a better way for their future."

And so it was. Cesar's old station wagon got parked across the road. An altar was erected on the back of the wagon and the workers came, first a few, and then many. The DiGiorgio election was held and the United Farm Workers gained the right to have a voice in creating their future as part of a democratic society, all because of the voice of the "least among us."

As the person who translated the old woman's words from Spanish, I think somehow the energy of her presence, the power of her simplicity, and the collective sigh of "Yes" that emerged from the collective in the room will remain forever etched in my own being.

—Juanita Brown

Commentary on The Least Qualified Among Us

How do we listen to a story such as this? What feelings are evoked? What mythic elements of group life are revealed?

From out of a seemingly impossible situation, hope arises. How can this be? From a ragtag group with little real power, victory is won. Is this luck? From a group with a legendary leader, Cesar Chavez, comes an answer from one who declares herself least qualified. Is this the movies? The answer arises again and again from those we interviewed that this is neither strange nor luck nor make believe. We are calling this a "pattern story" because we heard the dramatic themes, organizational elements, and group dynamics in story after story.

The dramatic appearance of group magic, and the emergence of collective intelligence often become manifest when the impossibility of the situation seems bleakest or when the "powers that be" seem most dominant. This is when, from a rational standpoint, we are furthest from our goal or most vulnerable to defeat. The "solution" must lie outside of what is known and thereby is outside of our immediate control. From within an organizational dynamic framework, these are the conditions that demand adaptive leadership, which Cesar Chavez modeled so well by describing the situation "without artifice" and by asking those gathered to bear witness to the paradox and to ask for help. From a transpersonal framework, these are the times we pray and ask for a higher power to aid our journey. The power of the story is furthered by the appearance of an old woman, sitting wrapped in a rebozo, doubting her qualifications to speak, but blessing the group with a small idea that grows from within the belly of the group into magic.

In the whole lies the answer. This is certainly one of the principles of collective intelligence. There is wisdom in the group and the wisdom is not in any one person by right of his or her biography—his or her position, knowledge, past experiences. No, the wisdom can come through anyone if the conditions are right. "We are here to listen," he says, "listen to every voice that wants to be heard." The possibility that the answer, or a portion of an answer, could lie anywhere among us creates an immediacy and heightened sense of presence. Everyone is needed ("none are rejected") because no one individual, not even the leader, has the answer. Some may describe this as the conditions of equality and inclusion or the effects of non-evaluative, non-hierarchical relations, others may simply know it as sacred. When the wisdom of the group is activated, a latticework of understanding grows with each voice, capable of holding meaning, just as a trellis holds a living vine.

Principle

Element of the Experience

Quickening

People speak of a moment when the "magic" happens, a moment of awakening, deepening, quickening, when they seem to transcend their egos or their personalities. They sense a world unseen, unheard, yet truly more there than anything they've experienced before.



"A moment of communion, where spirit is within us.... That was the moment where the shared will of the group became apparent to the group. Where the group knew why they had come together and what they had to address."

—Adam Kahane

"People were really able to enter the timelessness, the shimmering, that space where the mystery and ourselves are really one."

—FireHawk

"The field shifted, the field intensified. I felt an increase of energy...that always begins to happen first in the invisible. Then it shows up in the visible world. We pick it up in the invisible and then clothe it in a way that people see it."

—Glennifer Gillespie

Metaphor Cluster

Fabric

threads of stories weaving • tapestry of a whole • threads of diversity • fibers of relationship • society knitting a fabric of consciousness together • every fiber is alerted • big ball of tangled yarn • healing social fabric • rituals being woven • stitched symbols of wisdom worn on teaching belts • attention is like a net for gathering • in or out of the rational web • vertical and horizontal dimensions • clothing the moment • divine fabric • lead weaver • universality of pattern • unthreading • built, birthed or woven • quilt with a heartbeat • wrapped in tapestry • pulling all threads into the weave • threads fading in and out • shifting weave • spider as master weaver • pull on it, play with it • loosening weave • in or out of the rational web • fraying edges • fiber of relationship • weaving the fabric of community • inviting threads • stringing the beads • midwiving creative tension •

The atmosphere is a critical condition as well. The meeting hall is somber, much is on the line. Yet the somber atmosphere is not so much of panic or despair, but rather of a gravity that demands realism, honesty, and the shedding of pretense. The physical surroundings require nothing less, a farm labor camp where once Japanese were interred, and where watchtowers still loom. The psychological and social significance is echoed by the physical place—we know who is watched. We know who is dominant. Yet, the atmosphere also includes the non-physical aspect of intent. Let no one mistake the dearth of answers with the absence of intent. They are gathered together to seek a better life and also to change the future. Hope still flickers, if nowhere else, in the act of gathering together.

There is an emergent thread suggested by this tale, and others we have listened to, that the group is the medium by which the trajectory of history can be altered. Never before have democratic elections of this kind been held and never before has any group faced this particular dilemma. Will history, in the form of a new kind of confinement prevail, or will something new emerge? Possibly this is where the mythic lies: in a pattern repeated countless times but each time in a new context and with an outcome undetermined.

The “small idea” of the old woman represents the breakthrough, the “set breaker” in the language of systems thinking. There is an immediate inversion of the rules that guide their system. Where the power had resided with the growers to determine who can come in, the power now rests with the rules governing who can step out. The old woman's power is of invitation and symbolized later by an altar. This moment, of an old woman speaking her truth simply and without pretense, seeds the new order, even if things will change again, even if those in the hall know the old order will not simply disappear. Such is the power of such moments. We can hear, even feel, the collective sigh, “Yes.” Her words are genius, but they belong to the group.

And what do we make of Juanita's final comments, that the energy of this woman's presence became “etched in my own being.” Can transformation in a personal sense be catalyzed by interactions such as this in groups? The voices we listened to in our interviews continually spoke of energy, of presence, of knowing in a deep sense, of wisdom that emanates from the body. Is this part of a shared language of groups that is just beginning to be revealed? ■

“When we lift up the eyes of the mind to what is invisible, we should consider metaphors of visible things as if they were steps to understanding.”

—Hugh of St. Victor

Metaphor Clusters: How They Came to Be

“Reading the pattern stories and the clusters of principles enlightened and saddened me; the meaning I heard in reading the transcripts had been lost. Frustration led me to sieve each transcript for language that zapped me, which became sixteen handwritten pages of metaphors which clustered. When I read them I hear a chorus of globally dispersing voices.”

—Joan Lederman