

About this paper

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Systems and Power: Exploring an Ecology of Change

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This exploration of the relationship between business, politics and the media offers a radical critique of what is - and a hopeful perspective on what's possible.

Some years ago, when I began to discover what was happening to our planet, I felt distinctly troubled. It wasn't sudden or dramatic, more a creeping unease, a growing sense that all is not well with the world.

Melting ice caps and rising sea levels. Changing weather patterns, soil erosion, loss of species. Disappearing rain forests. Famine. Drought. Terrible poverty. Wars. Slavery. Problems with food, spreading disease, rocketing population and much more. The more I learnt, the more I questioned, and the more my unease turned to sheer frustration. It's called the burden of awareness, I think. Knowing, but also sensing that it's all too big and unmanageable - we've all been there.

I felt there were infinitely more questions than answers. And I felt no one in particular was that pushed about answering the questions. I began to doubt what I was being told. By the media. By politicians. By business. And I started to become aware of a yawning gap between what was presented as the truth, and what I understood from my own investigation and study to be the reality, and my frustration turned into anger.

When you begin to see things differently there's no going back. And what I noticed most of all was how the mainstream media that washes over us all in so many ways every day, never seems to join the dots between for example: climate change and the pursuit of economic growth, or the poverty of some nations and the wealth of others and many other missed connections.

How easily we miss the fact that everything is linked. The power of the corporate voice in shaping government policy, the lowering of taxation and the decline in public services, are all linked. The chronic rise in pollution of every kind, the premeditated waste of our consumer culture, the decimation of finite natural resources, and the rise of global brands - these are all linked. Our sense of disconnection from each other and from nature, the rise in crime and social disorder, and the alarming fall-off in public participation in the democratic process. These are all connected.

What can seem like separate phenomena are in fact patterns, the same predictable punch line repeated over and over again in a multitude of ways throughout our lives. But the connections aren't made. Business drags its feet on making any meaningful response. Politicians sidestep the issues. The media maintains a safe distance. And collectively *we don't act*. We behave as if nothing is

wrong! Public discourse churns on and on playing the same old tunes. You'd certainly never guess we are on the brink of a global crisis many scientists and others in the know tell us is shaping up to threaten our very survival as a species. And not at some distant point thousands of years down the road, either. Soon. This century. Possibly, even in the lifetime of many of us in this room.

Who is to blame for this nightmare? I wanted to know. Who is responsible for this monumental mess we've got ourselves into? I wanted to find the culprits, and confront them. *I wanted blood!*

All of this had been germinating in my mind and when the time came to research my thesis for a Masters in Responsibility and Business Practice at Bath University, I decided my chance had arrived. I would use the opportunity to go find the culprits and tackle them about what I saw as an obvious... collusion ... between business, politics, and the media. I decided my task should be to meet with leaders in all of these institutions, and I set to work.

I went to what I thought were the seats of power: chief executives in business, political representatives, newspaper editors, high profile journalists and senior broadcast executives, and my question was simple: knowing what we know, why don't you act?

What I discovered was startling. Much to my disappointment, these high-flying, supercharged, management types were ordinary people just like me! And what's more, I discovered many of them were quite ignorant of the issues, and those who weren't felt just as trapped, just as fearful, and every bit as incapable of putting things right, as everyone else. So no, I didn't discover any culprits out there. I didn't discover someone was to blame. Or even some

people. I discovered something else. Something bigger and immensely more important.

I discovered that we live and work in a system of power that is real, the net effect of which is to keep us economically productive and politically docile and limited in our sense of what it is we are here to do - other than go shopping. I also discovered that this system operates with our collusion - indeed it is kept in place *only* by our willingness to buy its message. To believe.

That's why I believe we will engage more effectively in bringing about change if we take a systems view of how things happen. Learning to understand how the world works at a more subtle level, how the dynamics of the system impinge on all of us, and in particular how power protects the status-quo, will help us to be more discerning about how we choose to act in any given situation and how we engage in changing the things we want to change. And that's what I'd like to talk about this morning. I want to explore the ecology of change.

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Why do we buy the message so completely? Why do we support a system that's doing so much damage? Maybe it's because we don't see it. It's invisible. We just don't see that we're part of a system.

The anthropologist Gregory Bateson said: "all the major problems in the world are the result of the difference between the way nature works and the way man thinks."

What he was suggesting is that our real problem is a problem of perception. The difference between 'reality' and how we see the world. And more particularly how we humans see our place in it. So

maybe what we have is not so much an ecological problem, or even an economic problem, but a problem - *a crisis* - of the mind?

How *do* we see the world?

I think we see it 'out there' somewhere. Separate from us. We're here, and everything else is 'out there'. And *everyone* else is 'out there'. We simply don't see our connectedness to *everyone* and *everything* else.

To understand where this sense of separateness comes from we have to take a short trip back in time, to our transition from a nomadic lifestyle when we went wherever the food was, to a settled life in which we exerted control over our food supply. Whereas Mankind's story had been one of connectedness - a sense of *participation with* nature's rhythms, the new story was about *control* over nature. And that story grew to see Man as the pinnacle of evolution and everything else - plants, birds, animals, insects and all of nature's wealth - as resources for Man's exclusive use.

This 'separate-ness' mind set that developed alongside the idea of agriculture, was later compounded by the emergence of early science with its mechanistic world view. Science was successful. Its view prevailed, and ultimately came to dominate our entire western culture, as it does to this day. We think we are so progressive and sophisticated and modern, yet the way we think about things is still largely based on a set of assumptions identified by people like Isaac Newton and his contemporaries more than *three hundred and fifty years ago!* Our way of seeing is really quite old-fashioned.

When Isaac Newton looked at the night sky, he saw a vast, infinite space that he believed was empty except for the stars and planets.

And on this belief he built an understanding of a world in which the *physical* elements, the things we can touch and see - mountains, rivers and seas, our bodies, our buildings - were the basic building blocks of existence.

When the famous apple fell from the tree he conceived of 'gravity' as a force that emanated from one source and acted on another, like billiard balls: the white strikes the blue, causing the blue to strike the yellow.. and so on. And it was the combination of this cause-and-effect thinking together with a focus on the physical world, that brought Newton to conceive of the universe as a clockwork machine. A tick-tock, tick-tock universe in which the physical parts interact in a mechanical, linear, chain-of-events-cause-and-effect way. This happens, so that happens. And even though science has long since updated this world view, we still allow it to completely dominate our lives in so many ways.

Two hundred years after Newton, Albert Einstein found that the poster child of this mechanical way of thinking was only partly right, for Einstein saw the physical elements too, but he also saw what was in between them. Einstein discovered that space is not empty at all, but filled with fields of energy that structure the space in which things happen.

Einstein's genius was to point to *the power of the invisible*. He suggested the basic building blocks of the universe are not the physical stuff at all, but these invisible fields of energy, and the stuff we normally focus all our attention on - the things we *can* see - are really secondary effects of these fields of energy. What really matters, Einstein felt, is the *relationship* between the physical elements because what happens in that space is what makes the

physical elements what they are. For example, what happens in the relationship between me and say my brother or my mother, is what makes me what I am, and makes them what they are, in the context of that relationship.

Einstein then went one step further, and suggested that there aren't any building blocks at all! Things don't exist as independent things or components, but only *in relation* to something else. If we transfer this concept into our everyday world we can see for example that doctors only exist in relation to patients. Patients only exist in relation to doctors. No patients, no doctor. No doctor, no patients. No students, no teacher. No teacher, no students. Here today, I am only called forth as a speaker, because you are good enough to listen. And you are only called forth as listeners because I am speaking. No listener, no speaker. No speaker, no listener.

So, science tells us the world isn't 'out there' somewhere. We call it forth. We call forth the whole world as we enter into relationship with it and with each other. And if we swap Isaac Newton's lens for Albert Einstein's, we can see that our world is *not* a machine, but a complex *web* of relationship in which infinite numbers of relationships overlap and combine to determine the kind of world we experience. What we're talking about here of course, is a system.

This conference is concerned with the reality of change, and how we can do things differently. I would like to suggest that the first thing we have to do is change our ideas about change itself. To stop seeing the world as a clock-work machine, and start seeing it as a non-linear, complex web of overlapping relationships. As a system. And it's alive. It's a *living* system. Constantly in the process of creation.

I'd like to mention just a few of the basic principles of complex living systems which I think we need to be aware of as we try to make change happen.

Perhaps the most important thing to understand is that complex systems aren't 'made'. Living systems are self-making. No one's in charge and there's no hierarchy. No boss. Complex systems make themselves. The system brings itself to life as the components of the system help to make each other: I help to make my brother what he is. He helps to make me what I am. Our relationship helps to make our family what it is. And the family helps to make each one of us. And because we live in nested systems - systems within systems within systems - our family helps to make the system that is our neighbourhood and our neighbourhood helps to make the system that is our city and so on.

Systems make themselves by taking information from the environment and responding to it. Information is the key ingredient in life because information organises life, or rather, it helps life to self-organise. And *new* information helps living systems to evolve. Hopefully, when this conference is over you'll have some new information, and that information will help you evolve in some way. Without new information nothing new can happen, so new information is essential to changing the system. And in human systems information includes actions, behaviours and choices as well as data.

Secondly, despite the fact that no-one's in charge and systems make themselves, they don't necessarily descend into anarchy and chaos, do they? The world today is very much like the world that showed up yesterday. Go to work, and the workplace you experience today is pretty much the same workplace you

experienced yesterday. Look at a photograph of yourself as a two year old, and look in the mirror today. The you you were then looks very much like the you you are now. A little worn, a little torn, but still much the same.

Why is that? How is it that if - as we know it to be the case - our skin is renewed every month, our liver every six weeks and our whole self every few years, how is it we don't morph into a dog, or a tree, or some other person? The answer is simple. At the heart of every system, there's an identity - a story or sense of what it is supposed to become. And in the process of coming to life a living system constantly refers to its story, filtering new information through it as it recreates itself. And it's just the same whether we're talking about our bodies, our organisations and institutions, or the wider society. There is a story at the heart of the system.

And then there are the terrible twins of order and chaos. While most of us I think, would probably feel that life as we experience it up-close, is a bit chaotic, it's actually far from chaotic. It is in fact, full of order and full of patterns. In systems language these patterns are called fractals. Shapes that repeat themselves right throughout the system, at many different levels. Take a tree for example. Look at its overall shape and then look at the shape of its parts - the branching and leaf clusters - and you'll notice that even the smallest twigs display the same pattern as the whole tree. This is an example of fractals at work.

Information taken into the system forms a pattern over time and repeats itself at every level. This is a metaphor for all of life, when you consider how small amounts of information repeated over time can shift a whole community in the direction of a new value. And it happens without our noticing, and without anyone in charge. No

conductor of the orchestra. The system makes and remakes itself. And it's the same everywhere, in our families, in our workplaces. In my consulting work with organisations, I can tell you that when I walk into almost any company I will find the same pattern of behaviour I experience at the front desk, repeated throughout the company at every level. Even walking from office to office you can sense these patterns.

And finally, there's feedback. If we want to change things it's very important to understand feedback. The system responds to information via the infinite number of overlapping and interconnected feedback channels in the web of relationship. Positive feedback amplifies new information and changes the system and sometimes even a tiny change can snowball and bring about big differences. Negative feedback, on the other hand, dampens down new information and keeps the system within certain boundaries, which explains why so often, in spite of new information in the system, nothing changes.

So when Gregory Bateson said all the major problems in the world stem from the difference between the way *nature* works and the way man *thinks*, I believe he meant that we *think* of the world as a machine rather than as a system. We believe it's predictable, manageable, measurable, knowable and linear, when the truth is we're living in a largely *unpredictable, unmanageable, unmeasurable, unknowable, non-linear system*.

It's this way of seeing the world that makes us break things up into smaller pieces in our efforts to control, manage and measure, and change things. Yet systems science tells us that if we want to understand a complex system we need to look at the whole thing - the bigger picture - the patterns and the relationships.

There's another very important dimension of social systems we must pay attention to if we're interested in changing things, and that's power. Power shapes our world. The moment there's more than one person, there are issues of power because power is the mechanism by which things get decided. That's simply how we do Life. Power is far from simple. It operates in many different ways and takes many different forms, and in my experience people find it helpful to be able to 'see' power, to be able to name it and point to it when they see it operating, because it explains a lot of what's going on in our world. So in exploring this ecology of change I'd like to present you with a palette of some of the more prevalent kinds of power we experience. What follows isn't a hierarchy of power, rather I will try to work from the more obvious to the more subtle and very potent forms of power.¹

Let's begin with what I will call Power 1.

Power 1 is the power of veto. This dimension is about who wins in decision-making. It's the power that says: I have power over you or you have power over me, to the extent that one of us can get the other to do something we mightn't otherwise do.

Examples of this power are everywhere throughout our lives. When an employer instructs an employee to work late or work the weekend and there's no discussion. Although he has other plans the employee co-operates because he doesn't want to be identified as difficult or uncooperative. That's Power 1.

When a teacher keeps a student back after school, Power 1 is at work. It's there when a parent tells a child: eat your dinner or you won't get any dessert. Or, do your homework or you won't go out to play. Each of these are moments of life we can recognise and each

is an exercise in power of one person over another. Power 1 is about observable winners and losers and it's a view that captures the attention of much of our news media. We are told about who's fighting, and who's winning: the government minister vs the lobby group. The protestors vs the organisation. The company vs the Union. The environmentalist vs the developer ... and so on

When we believe that we can tell who's more or less powerful in a society by studying observable behaviour, we are assuming that power is all about conflict that's out in the open. But that's not always the case, and that brings us to the next dimension of Power - the power that prevents conflict emerging at all.

What I'm calling Power 2 operates when a person or a group, consciously or unconsciously works to block conflict from coming into the open. The power that controls what's discussed, and what's not discussed. The power that organises some issues 'in' to public discourse, and organises other issues 'out'.

We see Power 2 at work when there's a meeting before the real meeting to decide what will be on the agenda and what will be 'off limits' at the real meeting. This is about mobilising bias in the system, dampening down information to keep potential issues from becoming actual issues. Power 2 is all about influence and authority. It's about coercion and manipulation of one kind or another, though it may not always be consciously motivated.

Governments and BigBusiness use Power 2 all the time. For example when a radio or television interviewee doesn't answer the question or as frequently happens, answers a different question. By not picking up the ball they're blocking the issue from getting onto the table at all. This is not just about 'not answering the question' -

it's an exercise in power.

News and editorial decision-making in the media is all about Power 2. The production of knowledge through research - a critical issue in shaping our world - is subject to Power 2 when it comes to deciding what gets funded and researched, and what doesn't. Most public relations work now commonly referred to as 'spin', is power at work.

In the run up to the Johannesburg Earth Summit, so much lobbying and influencing of the agenda by the business world was going on, that one of the senior organisers went public a month before the conference to warn people not to expect anything very useful to come of the deliberations. As he put it, the outcome had already been hijacked. That was all about Power 2.

But what if it's not that obvious? What I'm calling Power 1 and Power 2 focus on behaviour we can see. Observable conflict - or the suppression of it. This supposes that people know where their interests lie and there's an assumption that if they don't complain out loud or demonstrate any sense of injustice, their interests are not being harmed. But what if people aren't aware of their interests in the first place? How could they complain then? Wouldn't the supreme exercise of power be to shape perceptions and preferences so that no sense of injustice is even felt?

Is it possible that the public inertia we witness in relation to many of the hugely critical issues of our time - which we blithely put down to apathy - is perhaps a clue to a more subtle and deep-rooted power at work? David Edwards has said: 'The ultimately secure system of control is one that presents every appearance of complete freedom - for who then would perceive any need to challenge it?'²

This brings us to Power 3.

Just by our experience most of us can easily accept that people do exercise power over others, and people do control agendas everywhere, in business, politics, the community generally. People often have their own personal agendas. Power 3 suggests that this controlling of the agenda is not only in the hands of individuals, but embedded in the pattern of relationships and social arrangements we live and work within. In other words, power has biased the way things are organised in the system in the first place.

Power 3 controls the entire system by controlling the ideas and relationships that shape the system itself. This is not only about you exercising power over me, getting me to do something I don't want to do. It's about influencing what I want and what I don't want. Advertising is clearly a component of this power, preaching the commercial gospel day and night, night and day: 'success' looks like this... 'youth' looks like this... 'old age' looks like this... 'work' looks like this... 'happiness' looks like this... 'love' looks like this... 'living' looks like this... Repeating our story, over and over, and over again.

But of course it's not only about advertising. Power 3 works in many ways to shape public discourse, for example by ensuring that the concept of economic growth as an appropriate singular goal for a whole society is broadly supported and never publicly questioned. It's the power that shapes us by influencing the ways we are socialised, colouring our sense of who we are, what we should aspire to and what life is for. It's the power that shapes the *non*-production of information: what we don't know and what we don't discover, the reports that aren't commissioned, the investigations that don't take

place, the issues that don't get on to the agenda and so on.

When you wonder why things *don't* happen, or why things *don't* change, Power 3 is almost certainly lurking in the background. It's hard to see because it is not a discrete act or a specific behaviour, or even a conscious strategy. It's a *system* of power that is the product of common interests and overlapping relationships between certain processes and components in our social system.

For example, media ownership. The trend - or *pattern* - of media ownership is towards consolidation so more and more newspapers, radio and tv channels are finding themselves in fewer and fewer hands. In other words the source of the story, is narrowing. Owners of media conglomerates often point to a range of perspectives across their titles to claim non-bias, but one leading figure in Irish journalism said to me: "What *is* uniform right across the board, is what's *not* covered." Classic Power 3!

Just recently an entire supplement on climate change in the Sunday Independent included everything you ever wanted to know about changing weather patterns and the effect on insurance claims, but not a single word about what might be causing this pending global and human catastrophe. No link - no *hint* of a connection - between our fossil-fuelled global economic model with its gluttonous quest for continuous economic growth, and the gathering stormclouds of climate change.

The dots are never joined, because to do that would be to question the story itself. And ultimately, question ourselves.

As media outlets become business conglomerates, commercial pressures take hold: Grow market share! Cut costs! Increase profit!

Satisfy shareholders! This pressure to maximise sales, viewership, circulation and advertising revenue guarantees that celebrity and trivia, and so-called popular entertainment, will be chosen to fill the pages or the airtime rather than any serious and sustained coverage of complex or tricky issues like climate change, world poverty, the globalisation of capital or even HIV/AIDS.

In addition, advertisers quite naturally support media whose editorial opinion is business friendly, and since newspapers are subsidised by advertising to the tune of approximately 75%, it's a no-brainer that those that support the status-quo survive and thrive, while those whose editorial line is challenging to the status-quo must rely on funding from a much smaller pool: patrons, subscribers, supporters and volunteers and so on. And often they don't survive.

And so the voice of the status-quo dominates and endures, while the space for alternative views remains narrow and in the margins. And so long as what appears to be an overwhelming consensus is maintained, it's easy to dismiss those with alternative points of view as oddballs, eco-warriors, pinko-lefties, eccentrics, the lunatic fringe or whatever you're having yourself. So despite the fact that we've never had so many sources of media in this so-called information age, we get a remarkably unified 'story'.

This is further compounded by pressure on resources in the media. In the race to cut costs and maximise shareholder returns, most media businesses can't afford the luxury of having staff out in the world discovering the news. As a result, much of the news originates from government spokespeople, or public relations press releases. The media is also evermore dependent on 'free' content or cheap content, or secondhand content, so we have the modern

phenomenon of presenters sitting in radio studios talking to other presenters in other studios telling listeners what they can see on SKY TV or CNN!

You can surf the dial today and find more or less the same news on every station. This wouldn't happen in a healthier, more diverse system, but because of commercial pressures, the information in our social system has become a process of promoting and defending the interests of the economically and politically powerful, while *simultaneously* 'dampening down' many other alternative voices and interests. It sounds like a conspiracy, but it's not a conspiracy. It's not even about overt control.

To try and explain how it works I'd like to borrow a chemistry experiment used to explain how snowflakes are made.³ I want you to imagine a large square frame, like a biscuit-tin lid. Let's say it's six feet square and the sides are six inches high. Now imagine a chute sitting just above the square frame, and down the chute pour hundreds of tennis balls right into the square frame. What will happen? What will the end result of that process be?

The result is inevitable: they'll build an almost perfect pyramid shape because there's no other way for round tennis balls to settle on this structure other than in the shape of a pyramid. The most stable position for any tennis ball is one that builds the structure and most of them will settle in this way, while the others will simply bounce off and be lost.

Similarly, if we swap the square frame for a circular frame and poured the tennis balls into that frame the result will not be a pyramid, but a mound, because that's the only shape possible if you pour round tennis balls into a round frame. The point is, the

tennis balls respond to the frame. The structure they build depends on the shape of the frame. No one is controlling it. The shape is simply the inevitable result of the framing conditions.

This analogy illustrates that the real power in society lies with those who determine the basic framing ideas of our society: our purpose, our goals, our values and what we strive for. Together, the government of the day and powerful elites create the framing ideas: *maximise economic growth - via a system of private corporations - fuelled by a system of mass production - fuelled by mass consumption...* then, like the tennis balls in our experiment, the news and information, people, organisations, ideas, choices and decisions that support the framing ideas wriggle themselves into stable positions on the pyramid, while the more challenging or dissenting ones fall off and are lost.

In other words as our collective communicative behaviour is 'poured' over the framework of governing ideas, the behaviour that conforms to the pattern or structure of the pyramid, sticks, while the rest disappear off into the margins. That's Power 3. It's not a conspiracy. What we get is simply the inevitable result of the fundamental framing ideas. The ideas that we allow to become our 'common sense'. Our Story.

It all seems a bit depressing, doesn't it? The system seems so sewn up, so comprehensively sewn up. No escape hatch. No way out. But in spite of the enormous power that keeps things the same, things do change. So if you and I want to make change happen, as well as understanding the dynamic that keeps things the same, we need to understand how change happens.

Power 1, 2 and 3 as I've described them, all have one thing in

common: each of them sees power as Power Over. In other words, power as *descendent*... percolating down from one 'sovereign' or another, 'up there' somewhere. The Boss. The Government. The CEO. The Shareholder. The Expert. This way of thinking about power is a hangover from the sovereign-subject relationships of feudal times and while we have been gradually replacing monarchies and dictatorships with 'democratic' parliaments, we haven't changed our mind set. We haven't finished the democracy project anywhere, so when we want to see power we still 'look up'. The idea of the world as a hierarchy is still dominant in our view of the world.

In some ways, we cherish our sense of limitation believing that only 'they' have power, or that 'power is bad'. But this view of reality that places power outside ourselves and beyond our reach is inherently self-defeating, and self-fulfilling. Because the *powerless* create a vacuum that the *powerful* step into and fill.

If we stop seeing the world as a hierarchy or a machine and begin to see it instead as a system, we can see the circular relationship between the components and the system - how the components make each other, and make the system itself. From a systems perspective, we can't stop at Power Over. We must dig deeper to find another layer to our understanding of power. And to do that, we have to finally let go of the legacy of Newtonian science, the old paradigm view of the 'world-as-machine', because this prevents us from engaging fully with the dynamics of the universe.

In Newton's view of things, to make change you have to fight might with might. You need weight and acceleration to create sufficient mass, to topple the status-quo. But Einstein and modern physicists teach us that the world is far more sensitive than that. It's a system.

A web of connection and relationship, and it's alive. So we're not working with a clockwork machine. In fact, we're not working with matter at all. We're working with *energy*, and energy doesn't behave like matter.

Information, ideas and meaning are energies. They can travel at great speed and appear as potent forces that have totally surprising and often unexpected results. If we remember that changes in the physical world are just the secondary effects of changes in processes that are invisible, we start to recognise the critical role of information rippling through life's feedback loops. Size of effort is not the issue when it comes to change in a system.

What I have labelled Power 3 illustrates that ideas are not just powerful, but *astorishingly* powerful fields of energy that easily control our patterns of behaviour. In a self-organising universe information is the key resource that brings matter into form. Without it, nothing happens, and without new information nothing new is possible.

Because of the way feedback works in complex and non-linear systems, even slight variances can amplify in unanticipated ways. New information - or *difference* - disturbs the peace and if the difference is identified as meaningful, it's a potent force for change. In a systems world, anything that creates a disturbance plays a crucial role in goading a system to self-organise into a new form, so making 'difference' is critical.

Small acts of difference can have powerful effects, such as when we express our convictions courageously even if they seem daft in

terms of the prevailing 'common sense'. Or when we dare to make a challenging comment at a meeting when the norm would be to stay silent. (I don't mean being disruptive, but being constructively challenging by for example asking a different kind of question.) Or when we make a new choice in our personal lifestyle that others can witness, or we choose not to support the majority view.

In a systems world, these acts of difference have the potential to grow. The system will choose to accept or reject the new information and respond, and if it's meaningful to the system it will bring the new information inside itself where it will adapt and adjust and mutate as it moves through the feedback loops and amplifies the disturbance in unpredictable ways. When it becomes a disturbance the system can no longer ignore, real change is possible and the conditions that enable it to flip to a whole new place magically appear. This was the case with the Berlin Wall where, what appeared to be a sudden act, was in fact the outcome of very many small acts occurring within an unbroken wholeness, over decades. Each small act of defiance, or new way of thinking or behaving, invisibly connected to other small acts... growing, mutating, changing, *amplifying*... until suddenly the system 'jumped' to a completely new place.

Robert Kennedy described this phenomenon when he said: "Each time a person stands up for an idea, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, (s)he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centres of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance".

As we work to bring about change in a living system, we're working with webs of relationship. What matters are the *kinds* of connections in the web, and the availability of places to exchange energy and ideas, like this conference right here, today. In a web, we influence the entire system by working right where we are, with the system we know. From a Newtonian perspective our efforts might seem small and we may doubt our actions make any difference. Or if our view is Darwinian, we might hope our small efforts will somehow contribute incrementally to a large-scale evolution.

The quantum view explains the success of small efforts quite differently. It suggests that no single component is the cause. In a networked, relational world all action is both local and global, and the potential impact of local actions is not related to their size or weight.

Local changes affect the global system not through incrementalism, but because every small system - like you and me - participates in an unbroken wholeness. Activities in one part of the system create effects that appear in distant places and we never know how our small activities affect others through the invisible fabric of our connectedness. In this connected world, it's never a question of 'critical mass'. It's always about *critical connections*. And potential for influence is everywhere, literally whenever and wherever two energies meet.

We've talked about Power 1, 2 and 3 as having Power Over, now I'd like to introduce two more kinds of power, which are quite different.

Power 4 is Power *With*. This is the power that springs up whenever people get together and act together. Social movements and activists are critical catalysts in helping to make the wider society aware of issues, but they're not the real force for change. Change happens when the wider general public reacts strongly to counteract powerful elites.

Power With means that power is a property of the system itself. It belongs to the group or system and it remains in existence as long as the group stays together. When we say that someone is 'in power' we mean she is temporarily empowered by a certain group of people to act in their name. However, the moment that group disappears her power also vanishes. The celebrated author and psychiatrist Scott Peck calls this Temporal Power - power vested in the job or position, not in the person.

The organisations and institutions of this or any other nation remain in place only with our support and our consent. Like cupped hands holding sand, we hold them in place creating the illusion of power by the nature and quality of our attention, and in this we are greatly helped by the ongoing diligence of journalists and the mainstream media who, through their persistent focus on a narrow range of voices, constantly breathe life into what's called 'the establishment'. What we don't perhaps understand too readily, is that we can uncup our hands and withdraw our support at any time. That's our prerogative.

While Power Over is about descendent power - coming from the top - Power With is *ascendent* power that percolates up from people right throughout the system, and that's what ultimately transforms

the system.

Power With is the power of the network. And we shouldn't be surprised that just at the moment when the dynamic of Power Over seems to have sewn up our world and it seems impossible to escape its grip, the network is emerging as a powerful counterveiling force in all sorts of places, both face-to-face and in its technological expression across the internet. In a network, every member matters. Each one of us is at the centre. Responsibility passes through the web, leadership is shared. And crucially, we never know where we are in the network. You or I may be the critical link between different networks of knowledge or activity. Or we may be the last snowflake on the branch... before it breaks.

Power With is the mechanism by which people who don't have economic or political power can bring influence to bear on the decisions of business and political leaders - after all, it's resistance that keeps Power 3 on its toes!

The worldwide anti-war marches and globalisation protests which seemed to spring from nowhere with no obvious leadership, are changing the agenda. Power percolating *up*. The international growth of consumer activist groups targeting the likes of MacDonalds, NIKE, Exxon, Monsanto and others, and drawing attention to the tobacco, oil, pharmaceutical, biotech and other industries are all examples of Power With. The citizens action against bin collection charges and literally hundreds of similar instances where people are taking responsibility and acting together are all examples of Power With.

The key message here is that in order to cause difference, we have to *do* something. Something *different*. We have to take action, participate, engage. And this brings me finally, to one last but hugely critical dimension of power: Power 5. The Power *Within*.

Power Within is the fuel in the engine of Power With. If power is more a process than a thing, and if power is everywhere in the system, then no one is power-less. Power is present in every moment of every day, and in every relationship. It shapes the micropolitics of every situation and that's why the nature of relationship is critical, and why the quality of our intention in that relationship, as well as the quality of our being, are so important. Each of us has power, so we also have responsibility - not just for the here-and-now, visible effects of our actions or inaction, but for all the possible repercussions further down the line.

For there is no small act. Fractals teach us that in a systems world, the small things make the big things. The actions of real people form the repeated patterns that shape the world.

Power Within is a quality that grows every time we choose to connect our deepest feelings and values - our inner world - to our actions *in* the world. Power Within is the power of living with integrity and every time we act with integrity we take control of the power in our lives.

Power Over, the power dynamic we are inside, keeps things the same... but only as long as we don't see it's hold on us. Power With and Power Within have the potential to change the world.

So what do we do, if we want to be part of this change? What are

we prepared to do? The answer to that question is deeply personal, and you are going to answer it for yourselves in the next session. I'd like to offer some of my own thoughts, to help set that scene.

I think we need to liberate ourselves by seeing the story that traps us, and liberate others by helping them to do the same. We need to turn off the television, stop reading the same old newspapers and look for alternative sources of information to help develop a truer picture of the system we live in. We need to begin experiencing ourselves as part of a system, to see that the world is not 'out there, somewhere', but that we call it forth every moment of every day as we participate with it and with each other.

If you have radical doubts about our current story, make yourself visible, so that we can be visible to one another. It's time to stop feeling like the lunatic fringe and recognise that we're part of the fastest growing social group in western society. Indeed, the American sociologist Paul Ray, who's been doing research into culture and lifestyle for twenty years or more, tells us that some 50 million Americans and up to 120 million Europeans (including many in this room I suspect) don't feel their values and aspirations are represented in the current socio-economic story, so they're actively pursuing new ways of working and living and organising themselves. They're writing a new story. They are not seen by the current information system because that's organised to serve the status-quo. But they're there and for anyone interested in revitalising business or politics, they're the fastest growing and almost untapped market in the western world.

We need to get our act together. *Together*. We can't do what has to

be done, alone. No generation ever before, has faced the task we face now: to *consciously* evolve to a better place. Sure, we've evolved before, but we took time - millions of years. We don't have that luxury anymore. We must start "doing" democracy. Making time to meet with each other. Creating new democratic spaces in our workplaces, professional groups and communities, where we can openly discuss, debate and reflect on how we are implicated in the wider global issues and explore how those issues are reflecting back on our communities, our workplaces and our lives.

And we have to start developing alternative strategies. Stop looking for 'experts' and easy answers for heaven's sake! The experts don't really know and there *are* no easy answers. There are no maps of the future. We simply must start taking responsibility and sharing responsibility for bringing about a better kind of world and make our map as we go, by *learning* our way into the future, by asking great questions, being willing to experiment, willing to fail, and willing to learn. And by knowing that learning is messy, and real change is messy too.

It's a bit like spinning a web. As far as we know the spider has no plan. No concept of the wider context or the final structure. The web is truly emergent because the spider, working with a few simple but fundamental principles, simply interacts with what she has previously constructed and responds to what she meets. In human systems, those fundamental principles are our values.

And it's important to change our concept of change itself. In 'Empowering the Earth', author Alex Begg says: "Revolution is not a spectacle, it's something we participate in. And it is neither fast nor

sudden. It's slow, it's piecemeal, and it's mundane. Just like the destruction of the earth itself, it's the cumulative day-to-day actions of millions."⁴

In other words, deep change, is not a firework display.

Inside our organisations we have to start taking our wider responsibility seriously, and recognise that corporate values shape decisions, and decisions shape landscapes and lives. Perhaps we could ask: If we were to internalise the full cost of what we do, as well as the profits, would it still be profitable? When all the sums are done, is the difference we make, a net positive? The only way organisations will find out, is to loosen their sense of where their boundaries are, and widen the range of voices and perspectives that shape fundamental strategies. As the reality of our current ecological and social dilemmas begins to bite, the hard core financial case for responsible practice is getting stronger.

All of this requires that we get radical, wherever we are. I don't mean dying your hair pink (unless you'd really like to) or breaking windows at demonstrations. I mean "getting to the root" of the matter. And the root of all of it, is in here. It's in me. It's in you. It's the values, the beliefs and the assumptions that shape the behaviours, that shape the world.

Thank you.

Notes

- 1 In developing this framework of power I have drawn on the ideas of many thinkers, especially Stephen Lukes in *'Power - A Radical View'* (Palgrave, 1974), Alex Begg in *'Empowering the Earth'* (Green Books, 2000), Michel Foucault discussed by Barry Smart in *'Foucault, Marxism and Critique'* (Routledge and Kegan Paul 1983) and Macy and Brown in *'Coming Back to Life: Practices to reconnect our lives, our world'* (Gabriola Island, New Society Publishers 1998).
- 2 This idea is explored by David Edwards in *'Free to be Human'* (Green Books 1995) in commenting on the propaganda model put forward by Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman in *'Manufacturing Consent'*, Edwards comments that the [propaganda] model is intended to account for a dramatically effective system of control by which dominant interests are able to manipulate media behaviour from the broadest strategy down to the minutest detail of stress and intonation in individual journalistic reporting. A system of control which, he argues, is far tighter than anything imagined by Orwell or practised by totalitarian governments.
- 3 In relating Chomsky and Herman's argument that maintenance and control over the media and society generally doesn't necessarily require conscious planning (though this does happen), but simply happens as a result of 'free market' forces operating to meet the needs of the day, Edwards (ibid) draws on an old school chemistry experiment designed to demonstrate the formation of crystalline structures.
- 4 Begg, Alex (ibid) p.247