

SELF-ORGANIZING SYSTEMS — SELF-ORGANIZING EMERGENT COMMUNITY

By Anne Stadler © 2009

SPIRITED WORK, A Self-Organizing Emergent Community

What would it be like to live consciously in a co-creative community?

“Out beyond ideas of right doing and wrong doing, there’s a field....I’ll meet you there.” Rumi

Imagining a new way of doing anything requires a great openness to possibilities – saying “yes...and” to ideas, people and connections that logically don’t make much sense. It’s like living in a novel, or writing a screenplay. You wonder, what’s next?

In my imagination I saw a self-organizing emergent kind of organization but the details were fuzzy. I needed to experience the everydayness of it. I wanted to see what kind of governance and housekeeping forms would emerge. I wanted to experience co-creative emergent leadership. My intuition also told me that the organization needed to live in harmony with the natural order and rhythm of the planet.

At the same time I wanted to find an efficient way for people to be in touch with each other, to foster relationships of mutual benefit – relationships that would contribute to the vitality of earth, spirit, and the human future.

I asked Fritz and Vivienne Hull of the Whidbey Institute to collaborate with me. Theater director and actor Peter Donaldson joined us. We created a project to bring people together seasonally to explore how we personally and collectively could help the planet, with a focus on **practice**: putting our learning to work in our daily lives.

We originally formed Spirited Work as a year-long program of the Whidbey Institute. Using what we knew about the art of manifestation, opening space, and creating learning environments, we started with a company of explorers; and Spirited Work lasted almost seven years as a learning community of practice. By that we meant that in our life together, we practiced the self-organizing patterns of Open Space Technology, as well as those arising from

SELF-ORGANIZING SYSTEMS — SELF-ORGANIZING EMERGENT COMMUNITY

By Anne Stadler © 2009

Angeles Arrien's work: the Four Fold Way. Spirited Work met every three months from Thursday night until Sunday mid-afternoon and we were linked in an on-line open space learning environment facilitated by Big Mind Media.

This article is a reflection on what we learned about self-organizing leadership and robust self-organizing systems in the seven years of Spirited Work's life.

Whoever comes are the right people!

In total, about three hundred participants came to Spirited Work. They ranged in age from one to eighty years. They came from different parts of the United States, and places as far away as India, the Bahamas, Israel, Canada, Burundi, Nigeria, Denmark, and Colombia. People brought their gifts of singing, acting, musical skills, spiritual practices, physical labor, intellect, dishwashing, cooking, along with their professional acumen and curiosity.

In the years of our life together, we mourned the deaths of two of our members. Our circle was always permeable: welcoming the stranger, as well as the faithful who came and stayed.

In The Beginning

Four of us, the convenors of Spirited Work, met in Thomas Berry Hall on a grey rainy winter day. Fritz Hull had arrived earlier and had a warm fire going in the stove. We sat in the center of the large empty room to meditate on the question we had started with: "What is the higher purpose Spirited Work is serving?" Our focus that season would be the energy of the Warrior: *Show up and choose to be present.*

An hour later, in the same space, thirty five people were gathered in a circle. I felt excited and apprehensive. Several people in the circle had been buddies of mine at Antioch. I knew they were seekers like me, unwilling to accept anything incongruent or lacking in integrity. Year old twin girls played on the rug in the center. Their Dad had come to baby sit, their Mom to participate. (In succeeding years, they would all participate.) A round table held a bell and an Earth Candle. We lit the earth candle and the adventure began.

SELF-ORGANIZING SYSTEMS — SELF-ORGANIZING EMERGENT COMMUNITY

By Anne Stadler © 2009

The next season, a stranger arrived, just for that one weekend.

At the end of the first full year, we Convenors invited everyone to join us for reflection on what we were learning. A large circle formed in one corner of the Hall. The four of us sat in the center facing each other. We spoke of what we were learning. We cleared up conflicts that had arisen. We declared our gratitude and our intentions to continue the experiment. When we had completed our heartfelt reflections, we moved back into the whole circle. And all of us offered reflections. Then we invited anyone for whom it had heart and meaning to join us in creating the next year's Spirited Work.

We were a fractal of what Spirited Work would become.

O.T.I.S.

Summer was our season for Visioning. At one session, in a circle of about forty people, we shared our images and words, then we laid them out in another part of the room. A spiraling serpent-like structure formed. As I walked around it, I noticed a paper with the letters O.T.I.S. Every time it appeared, the spiral began another curve.

It made me laugh! OTIS—the elevator principle!

“What is this O.T.I.S?” I asked.

“Only The Important Stuff!” came the answer!

So here it is: to the best of my knowledge, the elevator principle: ***only the important stuff !***

Our Partnership with Nature:

Our relationship with Nature was intimate and educational.

We met seasonally to accentuate our harmony with the planet's rhythms.

Angeles Arrien's seminal cross-cultural study of how indigenous people related to Nature informed our seasonal practice. Each season related to a direction on the compass. Winter was North, the way of the warrior or leader. The way of living was “show up and choose to be present”. Spring was South, the way of the Healer or Relationship. The way of living was “Pay attention to what has heart and meaning”. Summer was East, the way of the Visionary: “Tell the truth

SELF-ORGANIZING SYSTEMS — SELF-ORGANIZING EMERGENT COMMUNITY

By Anne Stadler © 2009

without blame or judgment”. Fall was West, the way of the teacher/learner: “be open not attached to outcomes”. Each season people posted offerings that helped us manifest the relevant way of living. The offerings ranged from conversation to art work to meditation to movement—whatever practice people were inspired to offer.

Every Thursday night after we’d greeted each other and reassembled our circle in Thomas Berry Hall, we’d file out into the darkness, walking silently through the forest, up to the fire circle to greet and be IN the natural world...beginning our gathering by renewing our connection with Nature.

One spring season someone posted an invitation on the Agenda Wall:

“Let’s walk the land and see what it tells us about organic human organizations”.

The group that assembled included a seven year old who appointed herself our leader, and a couple of people in their seventies. We walked in silence through the forest. Tiny green fern tendrils were poking up from the composted needles and muck of the ground. Moss covered nurse logs held small trees and lacey huckleberry plants with drops of water trembling on their branching tips. Out of the swamp’s ooze thrust gold and green skunk cabbage. Smells of earth and decay filled our nostrils. Everything belonged: the vibrantly growing seedlings, the stately guardian cedars, the composting leaves and needles. Everything was held in a net of presence and emergence. Everything was self-organizing. We returned to our Listening Circle—an area of the woods where we often assembled in silence. And we reflected on what we were noticing:

“It’s an amazing abundance!”

“The life force is irresistible. If something is meant to grow, it finds the spot that suits it.”

“Collaboration and cooperation is intimate. Look at the nurse logs. Even if something is dying, it’s supporting life.”

What would these findings mean if they were applied in human organizations?

“Yes...And”...

SELF-ORGANIZING SYSTEMS — SELF-ORGANIZING EMERGENT COMMUNITY

By Anne Stadler © 2009

Whatever happens is the only thing that Could.

We learned about that in many unexpected ways!

One Saturday in the summer, four men posted their intention to build a path up the hill behind Thomas Berry Hall, the large gathering space, where we met.

When you looked down the length of the hall, you could see the grassy hillside where the path was to go through a magnificent vertical window.

As the men began their work, they consulted with Fritz Hull, founder of Whidbey Institute. He was the fellow who had the entire “plan” and vision in his heart and head. He gave them advice about where to put the trail, and off they went with shovels and picks.

At the end of the afternoon we came together for our Reflection circle. There, framed in the window was the slash of a wide path, switch-backing up the hillside. The men were basking in praise, and explaining that it would reduce erosion, help maintain the hillside, AND provide easy access for everyone..

Then Fritz spoke: “I want to confess I couldn’t believe what you guys had done to that hillside. I thought I’d described to you a path hidden along the far side, going straight up, and when I came in and saw it my heart sank. So I took a little walk and realized I needed to stop resisting it, and ask what’s the lesson for me? I’m not really in charge here—although I like to fool myself that I am! Spirit had a different idea. It’s turned out well. And I actually learned a lot from the whole thing.”

There were nods and bursts of knowing laughter. He was modeling the “Yes...And”, we were all trying to practice. The four men converged on Fritz, hugged him, then lifted him up, prone, above their heads and led a chanting cheering procession as all of us celebrated the new path...

Serving a higher purpose opens a portal for manifesting love in action

Hosting The Practice of Peace was another experience of that. In the winter of 2003, Harrison Owen had issued a call for partners to do a workshop called The Practice of Peace. At Spirited Work, a number of us joined Peggy Holman to host our version. Between our spring and fall sessions, we met regularly to work out the format and logistics of the event. Just as we did in Spirited Work, we began

SELF-ORGANIZING SYSTEMS — SELF-ORGANIZING EMERGENT COMMUNITY

By Anne Stadler © 2009

each meeting by meditating in silence on the question: “How does Practice of Peace serve higher purpose?”

A Report: Practice of Peace, November 2003:

150 people came for Practice of Peace. They came from as far away as Israel, India, Haiti, Northern Ireland, Colombia, Mexico, Denmark, Canada, Bosnia, Nigeria, Burundi, Nepal, Taiwan, Washington, DC, and many other places in the United States, for three days of Self-organizing activity: taking responsibility for their passions in the Practice of Peace. They were all ages, all skin colors, from many walks of life.

They began their daily circle in silence. The ringing of a clear bell signaled the beginning and end of their entry into silence. They organized themselves by using the simple tools of paper and felt pens to convene topics they care about. A long wall is titled Agenda Wall.

Many of the invitations were provocative: “Healing a Wounded Country”, “Watch a movie about the Wall going up in Israel and talk about the implications.” “Compassionate listening to personal stories of war and violence.” Others invited people to “Explore Playback Theater as a practice of peace”, “Talk about the disturbing issues people want to avoid.” “Engage the inner practice of peace.”

By the end of three days, people have honored each other, have listened to the call of spirit, have connected with the natural world. They have formed new bonds of friendship and collaboration. They have planted the seeds of new peacemaking initiatives: Global Citizens Journey will travel to Nigeria to build a library in a riverine community in the Niger delta; young people are joining other young people in building homes in Burundi; people are collaborating to open space in Bogota Colombia with street children; opening space in Israel for the vision of Jerusalem 2020; a media project to spread stories of success and peaceful evolution... and more!

A Co-creative Community is a gift exchange

SELF-ORGANIZING SYSTEMS — SELF-ORGANIZING EMERGENT COMMUNITY

By Anne Stadler © 2009

One of the persistent questions that came up was: “What kind of community are we?” People often arrived at Spirited Work with strong ideas about “community”. From their own histories, they brought many meanings. Community meant permanence. Community meant my tribe of like-minded people—no strangers. Community meant a “place” of gathering. So there were periodic struggles as we evolved our community of practice as a *permeable* circle, based on the patterns of Open Space Technology.

Appropriate Form emerges:

The story of how our Community Agreements happened illustrates how form emerges in an open space environment when the timing is right, as people take responsibility for what they love, remaining connected through the chaos of self-organizing, listening for guidance along the way.

Peter Donaldson, one of the Founding Convenors, championed the idea that we needed a Chaordic organization, (meaning an organization that moved seamlessly between chaos and order) with a constitution and a process for getting there. He posted an invitation for such a conversation in the marketplace several seasons running. He and others explored the relationship of Chaordic organizations to Open Space bringing the gifts of their passion and learning back to Spirited Work, both in Marketplace offerings and in informal conversations.

Several of us felt strongly that Open Space offered a different way of being in organization and arriving at appropriate organizational form, although we didn't know what that form was, so we continued to keep the question open, convening sessions reflecting on Spirited Work, community, and what constituted norms of Spirited Work.

Finally, in August 2001, a marketplace session was held on a issue offering common ground: Community Agreements. As a result of that session, and subsequent work by a small group who volunteered to write the agreements, our Community Agreements reflected an obvious tacit consensus. The whole circle felt the shift. We “knew” the work of the small groups fully reflected the particular caring of all those for whom this question had heart and meaning. All

SELF-ORGANIZING SYSTEMS — SELF-ORGANIZING EMERGENT COMMUNITY

By Anne Stadler © 2009

concerned felt heard, seen, and acknowledged. AND the process kept the question open until the appropriate question emerged.

We had listened, kept the space open by practicing “Yes...and”, offering our gifts and taking responsibility for our passions, until collective wisdom emerged. Our agreements lasted until Spirited Work was over.

Work is love made visible

Thomas Berry Hall, where we gathered every season was a constant reminder of work is love made visible! It was spacious, rising high above our heads. The south wall was all glass looking out on a flat courtyard to fields beyond. The East wall was our Agenda Wall. Centered in that wall was the beautiful window looking out on the switch backed hillside. There was always a faint smell of wood and wood smoke.

Four pillars crafted of trees from the surrounding forest arced along each side of the long rectangle. The wood had been sustainably logged with horses pulling the felled trees to where they could be taken for milling.

As you entered the hall, you felt a sense of the loving spirit that had animated the work. That spirit pervaded even the most difficult moments of our learning. Under the flooring was a cement pad, with the footprints and handprints of all those who'd done the work of building.

We often acknowledged the community of seen and unseen beings who were gathered here, including a family of deer who looked in on us, or joined us silently for our walks in the woods.

One summer day, a sculptor and the architect of Thomas Berry Hall, joined us for our Reflection Circle. The sculptor had brought over a large bell he'd cast-- to consult with the architect on where to hang it in the courtyard.

As the circle opened, we spontaneously began to express to the architect what it meant to us to meet regularly in that hall. Each person spoke about his or her appreciation—and all had something different to say. By the end of the circle, the architect, and WE, were absolutely in bliss. We concluded with an impromptu celebration that one of us began by singing/chanting the words that the sculptor had inscribed on the bell: “Salmon are silver shuttles weaving our

SELF-ORGANIZING SYSTEMS — SELF-ORGANIZING EMERGENT COMMUNITY

By Anne Stadler © 2009

rain-green world”. The whole circle wound through the room chanting and moving. Then, we opened the doors, and danced out to the bell, each one ringing it in turn.

Sharing the beauty you love is the magic of co-creative community

Many talented people were attracted to Spirited Work. The professional cooks who came helped create special Saturday night dinners. And in addition to posting offerings in the marketplace, the artists among us often shared their gifts after dinner on Saturday night in an impromptu show.

Imagine sitting with dear friends at festive tables in the great hall, lingering over a coffee (decaf!) and sweet dessert (Chef Tom’s Bread Pudding was a favorite), as Leonardo Da Vinci engages all of you in conversation. Peter Donaldson brought Leonardo to life, as he enacted his one-man touring show.

Another night one of our neighbors came for Saturday dinner: a sculptor, Jerry Wenstrom, whose gigantic totems were mounted on each of the eight pillars in the hall. We’d been meeting all weekend in the presence of the awesome creatures constructed of found objects—treating them as part of our circle. As their creator shared his inspiring story with us, we heard echoes of our own hopes and dreams.

In Spirited Work, everyone was regarded as an opening for the creative spirit to show up in our common life. So as each person made his/her unique contribution, we co-created and expanded the “field” of collective wisdom. Rumi’s field “out beyond ideas of right and wrong” was palpable and present. We experienced its expansion in the years we were together. And magic happened!

Listen in Silence. Trust Spirit. What is Needed will Emerge

On the material level, Spirited Work began with two principles: we will share costs and we want to make it available for everyone who wants to attend. That proved to be easier said than done. Several times we came up short at the end of the year, and we didn’t have the extra funds to actually open our doors to

SELF-ORGANIZING SYSTEMS — SELF-ORGANIZING EMERGENT COMMUNITY

By Anne Stadler © 2009

everyone. Finally, a volunteer group of Stewards came forward to handle the maintenance of Spirited Work. The first issue they tackled was money. How do we understand the costs? And how do we step into the flow of abundance that is always present?

Our habit of listening for guidance offered crucial support as we worked our way through the tangle of conversations that led to new initiatives.

Whenever we would find ourselves arguing about how to proceed, or getting insistent, someone would notice that as a disturbance which signaled an opening for learning. We developed the habit of stopping and listening in silence for a few moments. That practice became so consistent that often one of us would simply ding the bell and we'd fall silent, listening for guidance.

As a result, competent people sorted out the real costs, started a Community Fund to realize our intention to support all who were attracted to Spirited Work, and we embarked on a course of transparent communication so that the whole community of Spirited Work was aware of the details of our material life.

In a message on Catalyst, our web-based communication system, a new member of Spirited Work noted the social and material value we were creating: *"The first gathering of last year was my first involvement with the Spirited Work community and I remember the bowl and the sharing of reality of the debt, the taking of collective responsibility for it, and – most especially – the sharing of all that as an opportunity for practicing abundance.*

It was not the energy of "we have a debt to pay" or "we need more" or "the bowl is empty and it must be filled." Instead, I resonated with the energy of the bowl being a container ready to receive the abundance we had to share. The abundance already existed, we just needed to be the vehicles to manifest it! The silent auction became our method of playing the giving and receiving "game" and jumpstarting the cycle – and the recycling of material and financial energy exchange."

We shared the wealth as well as the costs. Starting in the year 2002, we shared our surplus with the Whidbey Institute. We gave a gift to one of our members for a new artistic program he was developing, and started the year with money in the bank for the Community Fund.

SELF-ORGANIZING SYSTEMS — SELF-ORGANIZING EMERGENT COMMUNITY

By Anne Stadler © 2009

At a social level, we learned how to open the circle to the disturbing voice and/or the consistent presence of the unspoken. In maintaining an open circle, we invited the gift exchange which is at the heart of OST—people taking responsibility for offering what has heart and meaning for them. The Marketplace of the community provided a regular and predictable platform for whoever cared to take responsibility. This pattern facilitated just-in-time leadership, and appropriate practical form. As each person showed up, in his or her unique beauty, I often sat there, close to tears, AND wreathed in smiles at the wonder we each are.

At the spiritual level:

Silence became a key to opening the circle to the gifts of the transpersonal field of Spirit.

Our web-based communication environment facilitated learning and helped us create knowledge.

We created intellectual value by applying what we were learning in our daily lives. WE freely offered what we were learning to others who wanted to start Spirited Work where they lived and worked.

The Buddha Steps In

The seeds of the end of Spirited Work were planted with the visit in 2003 of a Buddhist monk to the group. He asked if he could visit us to learn about the practice of Open Space organization. He felt that it could benefit his lay Buddhist community. We welcomed him, wondering what we would learn from him about our practice. We found, through our meditation and discussion afterward, that just as each one of us had our own life and purpose, so Spirited Work had its own transcendent purpose. It wasn't just the sum of its parts. Early in our lifetime, we'd explored Thich Nhat Hanh's statement: "the next Buddha will be a collective". In 2004 Mark Jones posed a challenge to the

SELF-ORGANIZING SYSTEMS — SELF-ORGANIZING EMERGENT COMMUNITY

By Anne Stadler © 2009

Spirited Work community. He declared he wanted to be part of a Sangha—an enlightened community. Several of us concurred.

In my reading of what happened: this declaration of intention gave rise to the end of Spirited Work in the form it had taken. It opened a new question for all of us: What IS an enlightened community? Not an enlightened community in its historical form, but today's version.

During the life of Spirited Work, I'd had consistent meditation images of people tending a fire that then sparked out in all directions across the planet, like the seeds of a dandelion or an exploding flower of fireworks. Is this the form of an enlightened community? I wondered.

Spirited Work had been many things to many people. Some of these came out in a session during the final season of Spirited Work:

Saturday 10:30 AM. Thomas Berry Hall

"My name is Glenda and I want to talk about What is Spirited Work? We'll meet right after we finish the Marketplace, in the Dining Room."

That is the question Glenda posts after a day and two nights of swimming in the rivers of earnest conversations, cosmic awakenings, and bumpy undercurrents, relieved by solitary walks in the rain-washed woods.

In the dining room, three tables are pushed together to accommodate the growing crowd attracted to her question. Fifteen people gather around the tables, some newly acquainted with Spirited Work, others present at its birth, and many from the in-between stages of its life.

The conversation is rich with stories, revelations and contradictions, revealing the Rashomon-many-storied nature of Spirited Work.

So a scaffolding for Spirited Work emerges: the practice of Open Space

SELF-ORGANIZING SYSTEMS — SELF-ORGANIZING EMERGENT COMMUNITY

By Anne Stadler © 2009

Technology and the Four Fold Way, and the stories of individuals who are integrating it into their lives.

Finally we meditate on the question: What is the essence of Spirited Work? Here are some of the jewels we received, each exposing a facet of what begins to appear as a many-faceted diamond:

**Spirited Work is people who get together once a season to explore how to bring more meaning to the work they do and bring greater service to the world.*

** Spirited Work is a place where I grow exponentially, with a great group of people supporting me in my personal transformation.*

**Spirited Work is a balance of openness and form. How do we open to emergence and hold form at the same time?*

**Spirited Work is an experiment in being an Open Space organization.*

**Spirited Work is breathing IN and breathing OUT.*

When It's Over...It's Over...

In summer 2005, we gathered to celebrate Spirited Work, to share learnings, and to declare it “over”.

Spirited Work was like a kalaidoscope: turn it one way, you have a company of explorers, turn it another, a community of practice, another, a gift exchange, with each person receiving and contributing different gifts, facets and meanings. People learned and grew. The community learned and grew.

The experiment was complete. And out of it, many new fires and new initiatives have emerged:

the Evolutionary Salon, the Integral Wellness Group, the Integral Spirit Legacy Project, the Hosting Council. And, Radiant Networking: As some of us see it, the enlightened community is not a place. It is not a permanent or covenanted congregation of people. It is a radiant network, extending planet-wide, happening in exchanges that acknowledge our intrinsic Oneness. Radiant Networking supports the life force in any place, person, or relationship on the

SELF-ORGANIZING SYSTEMS — SELF-ORGANIZING EMERGENT COMMUNITY

By Anne Stadler © 2009

planet, serving the well-being of all. Several of us are now engaged in that experiment, exploring the question: What is the nature of a bodhisangha that is a radiant network?

Co-Creating Your Legacy Practice:

A Practice for Individuals and Groups

For many of us, Spirited Work gave rise to a Legacy Practice. Through our increasingly conscious participation in this learning community of practice, we evolved what I am now describing as a “Legacy Practice”.

Here is my definition: Your Legacy Practice opens space for the manifestation of your soul’s purpose on behalf of all: seen and unseen, past, present and future. It is the humble practice of *being* the flow of spirit...bringing your presence fully alive in the dailyness of mundane acts. It is taking your personal inner work that small crucial step from self, to “Self on behalf of all.”

To put it bluntly, it is being that which you came here to be-- God’s gift to the world.

Such a practice is the essential foundation of the co-creative community that Rumi imagines: “*Out beyond ideas of right doing and wrong doing, there’s a field, I’ll meet you there.*”