

Change in Flow: How Critical Incidents Transform Organisations

Editors: Nancy Wallis and Maria Spindler

Nancy Wallis and Maria Spindler

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Proofreading: Deborah Starkey

Layout: www.kronsteiner-lohmer.at

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Suzy Adra

Chaos Theory in Creative Process

Abstract

The opposite of a system in flow is a chaotic system. This paper examines chaos theory from a multiplicity of psychological perspectives. I begin with a definition of chaos and follow with examples of how chaos manifests and self-organizes in the creative process, such as writing a paper or painting artwork. I further explore the chaos of war from an inner world perspective. The chaos that war produces is enormous and has repercussions that are mostly seen, measured and felt. And yet, there are some underlying effects of war that are never seen, measured or noticed. One of them is the ability of an individual to carry on with his or her life, as if nothing had happened, after severe trauma. This aspect of one's identity and its influence on one's fitting in, navigating within, and contributing to organizational life is relevant today more than ever before. And so, creative processes within organizations hold the space for and make richer the flow of individuals integrating aspects of their identities.

Keywords: flow, chaos, emergence, self-organizing, creative process, war, trauma

How flow is important to organizational life

Controlling life is the opposite of flowing with life. Sometimes things seem chaotic on the outside but there is an inherent order to this chaos. The more we struggle against the flow, the more difficult it is to accomplish what we need to. Flow does not mean to be submissive, but to let things come to us instead of having to go after them. In organizations, this would be letting the seeming chaos take its course until it self-organizes into a new paradigm with emergent properties. In this paper I explore several ways individuals

may choose to let flow occur, or how they may contribute their part to the larger sense-making process of seeming organizational chaos.

Chaos as a container for flow

Chaos theory tells us that events that seem random and chaotic have an underlying interconnectedness and purpose. Chaos is characterized by birth and death, old and new, randomness and order. What seems to us as bizarre or out of the ordinary can actually have a sensible mathematical formula behind it (Briggs & Peat, 1999, pp.1-5). The universe is made of fractals that can be measured through mathematical equations, indicating an inherent order to the seeming madness.

Examples of chaos abound in the natural world as well as man-made systems and organizations. The flow of a river, the flight of a butterfly, a tornado, a baker baking bread, writing a paper, painting a painting, and last but not least the effects of war on the human psyche: all are great examples of chaos theory. All chaotic events cannot be controlled but must be carefully attended to like the baker tending to the rising dough.

Examining Chaos from Multiple Inner Perspectives

Emergence is, according to chaos theory, when any system, large or small, self-organizes into something coherent new and unique. Emergent, in philosophy, is having an emergent property, something unexpected that arises from existing components that do not necessarily have any resemblance to where they came from. It is a budding or unexpected arising of something new that did not exist before. Bullock and Trombley describe Chaos as “*phenomena and expressions for which it is not possible to predict how the situation or the calculation is going to develop when the starting conditions change only very slightly*” (Bullock and Trombley 1999, p. 114).

This definition does not mention that chaotic systems can give birth to ordered behavior through non-linearity, that they can create order out of

chaos, and that chaos combines simple and complex aspects that alternate in what is called ‘intermittency’ or sudden disorder. In this sense, it is applicable to many areas of our life. Furthermore, there is no mention of bifurcation, feedback loops or self-organization. The bifurcation point is the moment when something hits a plateau and in so doing the course it was taking is completely changed. Positive and negative feedback loops start to take place. When we are hot, our body regulates itself by sweating; this is a negative feedback loop. A positive feedback loop usually expands the effects rather than decrease them. When both types of feedback loops are allowed to be present, self-organization takes place. The system must be open to the flow of energy (Briggs & Peat, 1999, pp. 13-20). In this sense, chaos theory is the study of how systems that appear chaotic are actually following certain laws or rules. Two key figures in discovering this were the physicist Henri Poincare, and meteorologist Edward Lorenz.

In what follows, I shall examine non-linearity, order out of chaos, and intermittency from the perspective of the inner world. Below are some applications of chaos theory, taken from my life. Writing a paper, painting, and the inner turmoil war produces are characterized by nonlinearity, self-organization, and systems of feedback loops within the psyche. The result is emergent and unique in all of these cases.

Writing a Paper: a Small System

The chaos of writing a paper begins with hours upon hours of reading. Multiple sources are consulted, articles, blogs, websites, journals, magazines, and even observing daily routines, remembering past incidents, and taking lots of notes. This process can be mentally draining but also very exciting. Trying to make connections within the chaos of all this information, a haphazard system, nothing makes sense in the beginning; if it does make sense, each piece of information is clear on its own but not as part of a larger whole.

I revisit my notes, observations, typed up or hurriedly scribbled on the back of a school flyer or magazine cover, sometimes editing, sometimes adding,

and sometimes just staring. Returning the following day, I add some more information, maybe delete some sections, I pause, I wonder, I think, and add another paragraph or two, and the cycle repeats itself for several days, and at times a couple of weeks or even months. Then all of a sudden with just one random paragraph or sentence or two, all the text in the document self-organizes into a coherent understandable paper or article which actually makes sense. How did this happen? Chaos theory holds an answer.

It is no coincidence, therefore, that as I write this paper, my son asks for my help with his school project. He needs to present on one of the Greek gods. And this is how we come across the Greek god 'Khaos' who represented the void, and was one of the first gods in Greek mythology. My son ends up choosing Apollo, but this is beside the point. My point is, I am now writing about the Greek god 'Khaos' in a paper about Chaos, which randomly emerged, and self-organized on this page, in this particular paragraph.

Emergence in the Painting Process

The same process of self-organization is true for painters. I know from my experience as a painter. There is something routine about approaching the canvas, and yet the manner in which the painting comes together is random. Although there are certain aspects that are familiar, it is always a unique process, never occurs twice, and it goes something like this: I gather my paint brushes, and canvas, and stand in front of the easel. I have been called to paint today, yet most of the time I am not sure what the end result will look like. I pause, sketch a few lines on the canvas, and wait. Dip my brush into the blue paint, pausing again, and then paint another mark. Dipping, pausing, painting...the process repeats itself. I am unsure what it is exactly that I am attempting to do. I rinse the brush, take a break, get a snack, and come back to the canvas. I turn some music on and proceed to paint. As the process flows, in a cycle of dip, pause, paint, paint, pause, dip, the motions become free flowing, I am not painting anymore, but being painted through. I intuitively know when the painting process has reached a bifurcation point.

Most of the brushstrokes do not make much sense to me, some of them really look out of place, and perhaps I need to cover those up? Wash them off? My mind is pushing to restart the painting. But the random strokes of my brush make sense to each other, they start making links as if communicating, and creating a feedback loop. This loop in turn transforms the blotches of paint into something recognizable. Then it becomes a dance of creation where the paint is coming onto the canvas at its own will by some 'magical' force that cannot be described. From all the scattered paint, the colors, shades, brush strokes; it all seems to be outside the boundaries of time and space, behold! It is a painting with perspective, depth, color and recognizable shapes of a variety of sizes symbols that ebb, flow, and blend...order out of chaos!

Understanding Chaos in Larger Systems

My painting process is inherently therapeutic on one level. On another level, it helps me understand other larger processes taking place around me. Systems and how they self-organize after major catastrophic disasters, traffic and how it regulates itself, birds flying overhead, and rivers flowing. Chaos need not always address the beauty of life, I got to thinking, and perhaps chaos theory applies to war? Not just on a larger system and political level scale but on a more human, and social level. War is a large system. It produces mass chaos in every way, shape, and form, internally and externally, in the streets and inside the psyches of humans, and not to mention its physical effects. When one's entire life has been turned around because of war, when time is a blur, mornings are like evenings are like yesterday. Saturday is like Tuesday is like Sunday, and when all you do is sit in a corner of a narrow corridor waiting for the day to end, wondering which minute you will die, you barely eat, you hardly ever bathe, have no water, and no electricity. You do not even see the light of day for weeks on end because you are hiding in some dark corridor with the neighbors, and their children, and their cousins, and their mentally unstable aunt. You wonder if you will live past sixteen. You start imagining places and things to keep yourself busy. You sing tunes of songs that you know, just to distract yourself from the sound of rockets, and

bombs. All this external chaos produces internal chaos but the most amazing thing about it is, it is self-organizing. When the cease-fire happens, you get up from your corner, even if for a brief couple of hours until the fire begins again. You make your bed, take a bath, and rejoice in having electricity so you can watch some television. It is now safe to go outside, they tell us. So, everyone gathers him or herself, and goes out to visit with family and friends, grocery shop, and play, go to the beach and attend parties. Then the cycle repeats again in a slightly different way until a new bifurcation point is reached. In this case, we see human adaptation at it's fullest. This capacity varies in degree from an individual to another. I am not trying to minimize such horrors and pain, as many live their entire life trying to overcome such trauma. I am only noting the capabilities and adaptability of the human mind. The great psychologist Carl Jung once remarked that it is the lack of creative expression that creates neurosis in our being [Read (Ed.), 2014]. I agree with Jung, and believe that it is possible for anyone to overcome trauma or move past it given that they have at least one way of expressing themselves in a safe, and constructive creative way.

As Briggs and Peat explain in the book *Seven Lessons of Chaos*, "Our brains have evolved to spot the patterns within complex and ever-changing situations, while at the same time uncovering the nuances within these patterns." (Briggs and Peat, 1999, p. 97) Perhaps this explains how the Lebanese have adapted to a way of life that incorporated a civil war as part of their daily routine? It is a puzzle because if you ask most Lebanese they will tell you that it has become normal. Maybe this is because one does not appreciate life until there is deep uncertainty, as Krishnamurti once noted. This uncertainty is perhaps what creates a need for survival as it pushes us to our edge so that we learn to try to make sense of our world (Peat, 2002). Despite the discomfort, one has to trust and surrender to the idea that all will be well. This is the only way to survive uncertainty. In the case of Chaos, one has to believe in a positive outcome and relinquish control. As when writing or painting, we trust that the end result will be something new and useful.

The subject of a self-organizing psyche had me looking for more answers as to how this is possible. To answer this question, I recalled Tarthang Tulku's insights on knowledge, particularly what he says of our thought patterns. Tulku believes that we see our thought patterns as linear. In reality our thought patterns are characterized by "*non-linear complexity*" (1987, p.135). There are always moments between moments and thoughts between thoughts. This non-linearity creates patterns. Patterns are the basic components of fractals, and fractals are a product of complex and chaotic processes (Briggs & Peat, p. 81).

Chaos and Emergence in Organizational Life

The examples of emergence and self-organization mentioned above are helpful in understanding Chaos Theory in an organization. Organizational leadership can be thought of as creative process. An individual may use chaos and flow to integrate his/her identity in an organization by the ability to be with uncertainty and ambiguity, and take responsibility for self-organizing by being focused and present, trusting, establishing trustworthiness, and communicating openly and honestly.

There is an additional dimension here, and that is self-care: adopting habits such as meditation, yoga, painting, cooking, and athletics. All these are activities that help the psyche self-organize and recover from stress and deal with uncertainty.

One can create emergence through service and aligning self-interest with that of the greater good of all concerned. It is through collaboration and co-creation that emergence can occur in the life of an organization.

Summary

Chaos is everywhere. It is random, self-organizing, and its emergent nature is bound to bring change, hopefully for the better. It is the fundamental dynamic of the universe that helps us adapt, evolve, and transform in the

subtlest most natural ways possible. The danger lies in trying to control the outcome. Controlling is the opposite of flowing. When we try to control, all sorts of bizarre things emerge, as we see in the bizarre entities that share fundamentalism (Slater, 2008). Fundamentalism is in actuality the fear of relinquishing control of ideas and belief systems of wrong and right. Writing a paper, painting a painting, recovering after the traumas of war and other major catastrophes all require us to self-organize into our maximum capacity. Self-organizing is how we process our fear, trauma, and stress for the benefit of society as a whole.

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