

# Interview with Peter Merry on Leadership for Sustainability by Barrett Brown

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A sunny day at the beach in the Hague

## **The Journey to Sustainability Leadership**

*BB: Could you tell me how you got into sustainability work?*

PM: Oh, it probably goes back to when I was about 20, finishing my studies in modern languages, and I don't quite know what happened actually, but something shifted inside of me. We had a park outside our student house. And one day I just went out and sat in the middle of this park on the grass. There was a big smile on my face. I went back inside and my housemates said, "Do you realize how stupid you looked sitting in the park?". All I could say was, "No. It just felt great."

That was around the time my mother had given me a copy of Fritz Schumacher's book *Small Is Beautiful*, and that was really a key wakeup moment. At the same time I'd been studying absurdist French theater, and particularly a guy called Antonin Artaud who was around at the turn of the last century. He wrote loads of stuff, poetry, theatre, philosophy. But he wrote this one piece on the nature of sanity and insanity claiming that those who were seen by society as insane were actually more sane than the mainstream. He himself was locked away in a lunatic asylum for part of his life. And that, to a naïve, open-minded, idealistic 20-year-old, was a pretty interesting proposition, particularly as I had an uncle who was manic depressive, and whose paintings I thought were great!

So that combination of events basically broke my consensus trance, waking me up and bringing my critical mind to bear on the nature of society. Schumacher's book, for example, questions the fundamentals of our whole economic system. From that moment on, my critical mind, particularly in the context of sustainability and the planet, was awakened.

I think what also played an important role in terms of my relationship to nature was the fact that as children we were taken camping every summer holiday to the far northwest of Scotland which is a wild, wild place. Maybe we got sun for two days of a two-week holiday; and when it rained, it really rained! But as a kid somehow you didn't care. As I look back I see how we were exposed to the rawness of nature, the power of the sea, the majesty of the mountains – and that can't help but leave a lasting impression.

I think somehow that that built resonance with nature into my system. And when I read Schumacher's work about how we're creating an economic system that actually doesn't honor the nature of nature, it lit a fire in me to do what I could to heal those relationships. So that triggered things and I joined various NGOs like Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth getting into environmental activism, anti-road protests and the like.

After completing my studies in French and German, I went to Paris for a year ostensibly to teach English at a University, but that was only 12 hours a week. My real reason was to find a theater company to work with. Through a number of synchronicities, I spent a year working with a Parisian theater company, very body-inspired and improvisation-inspired, with an Iranian director who had worked with Peter Brook. During that time I was reading a lot on development work. I don't know how I got hold of that. It was Wolfgang Sachs' work on development and a critique of, overseas development, society development and the whole way we looked at development as an issue.

## **A Quest Year**

And at the end of my year in Paris, I was really into the theater but my idealistic self was awakened. I decided that theater couldn't change the world and that I wanted to get into development work. I felt that if I wanted to get into that, I really needed to experience it myself. So I signed up for Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) and went to Ghana to teach English. I asked for an isolated place, and got it! There was no electricity or running water, and no paved roads for miles around. I had a box of books shipped out which included Jonathon Porritt's work on green politics, a lot of personal development books like Gurdieff and Ouspensky, and Schumacher's other book, *A Guide for the Perplexed*, a really beautiful little book on spirituality. And I was doing a distance learning course through VSO on development economics and globalization.

So I was exposed to all this when I was very vulnerable in a way because in that context all your cultural handles are taken away. I was writing while I was out there too, and became fairly clear that my work was in that area. Then what happened was that there was a big problem at the school as they felt the impact of a national Structural Adjustment Program, introduced by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. The consequence was that funding had been cut to the school because the government had to cut public spending and nobody could afford to pay. Until then they had paid with cows, goats, chickens and whatever they had. But now the school ran out of money because it was a boarding school, due to the big catchment area. They enforced the rule that if people didn't pay their school fees, they wouldn't be allowed into the dining hall which put an end to their education. The kids would have had to go home to their village. The day they enforced that rule, a bunch of kids went to town and got stoned and drunk and burned down the school.

So there I was in rural Ghana with literally on my doorstep the impact some guy taking a decision behind the macro-economic model in Washington saying Ghana needs to cut this and a chain of events that leads to a burned down school and a bunch of kids' education is screwed for the foreseeable future.

I now had a knowledge of the broader context and an experience of the reality. I could have gone onto another school because it was after a year and normally you stay for two years. Instead I decided that what I actually needed to do, was to get to the cause of the problem, rather than keep cleaning up the symptoms. So I embarked on a campaign to change the whole global economic system. I decided to go home.

## **Educating Myself**

I had always had The Guardian Weekly shipped out to me and I saw an advertisement for a master's degree in Human Ecology at Edinburgh University. What attracted me to it was it that it had words in it like development, environment, ecology, spirituality, education, business. It was truly cross-disciplinary. So I signed up for it.

When I got home after the year in Ghana, I had six months before the course started, so I went to London and I did some work with the Tibet Support Group as a volunteer for six months, campaigning to stop the Chinese growing rice which would only be eaten by Chinese settlers because the Tibetans generally ate barley. The European Union was going to fund this project. I also got pretty involved in green politics and green activism with the whole reclaim the streets, roads protests and direct action movement.

At Edinburgh University I then did this master's in Human Ecology which was fantastic. It included deep ecology work, a very experiential way of feeling your connection to the Earth. It embedded in me a cross-disciplinary approach as well as a deep connection to the Earth and the power of Eros and music and poetry and the arts. I did my thesis which was called *Why Work?*, not asking should we be working, but how do we value useful work. So what is useful to people and planet and how would we need to change the global economy and how would we need to change local economies to value useful work.

I also got involved in green politics, ended up in the National Executive Committee of the Green Party of England and Wales as their international coordinator and helped run the European election campaign in 1999. We had proportional representation for the first time so we actually had a chance of getting people elected, which we duly did. Indeed, Caroline Lucas, who was one of the Members of the European Parliament elected has just become the first Green national Member of Parliament under our first-past-the-post system in the UK.

That two-year campaign experience was very interesting because, on the one hand, we were trying to show a professional face to the public, we had to direct limited resources to specific candidates to target what we were doing, at the same time we had an activist party on our back the whole time, insisting that everything was done by consensus, and that all resources should be shared equally. What I noticed was an inconsistency between the talk about the importance of love, tolerance, and respect and the minimal practice of it within the community itself but also towards anybody else in society that didn't believe in the same things that you did. Something doesn't sit well with me there. So it was a very invigorating experience, that campaign period, and it was very draining at another level. It was at that time that I moved to the Netherlands because my wife got a job over here.

## **From Content to Process**

During my engagement with Green politics, I had been doing a lot of stuff on the content of sustainability, on what the world should look like, what policies we need to have in place globally, and at the European as well as local level. But it was all content focused.

My attention shifted to process when I started realizing that there wasn't any point in shouting at the rest of society to be like this when we were so far away from my ideal vision. So how do we actually start to move in the right general direction? My attention focused on how things change, how do people change, how do societies change? That coincided with my move to The Netherlands and also with my discovery of Ken Wilber's work. When I read *A Theory of Everything* which had the Spiral Dynamics model of human development embedded in it, lots of things clicked into place with my experience of the last years.

What happened at that point is that my sustainability work, if you take a pure ecology focus, shifted into the background. Quite a lot of my focus then went into personal development, change, integral thinking and that world.

I was interested in moving in the right general direction but I wasn't really focused on any content. I was actually probably focused on discovering a new domain of consciousness which is this integral domain of consciousness in myself and exploring what it means to try to apply that around me. About three years ago (2007), the content and process reconnected again. So for about a period of seven years (which is they say the period of time it takes for every cell in your body to renew itself) two different pieces integrated themselves, the how and the what.

When I was into the integral work, I did a change process with an IBM business unit which actually had nothing to do with sustainability; they were business continuity and resiliency services. But what we showed is that by taking an integral approach, we could get 96% employee satisfaction and triple digit growth in a very traditional business environment. It was my proof that we can shift corporate contexts as well this way, if you take this kind of approach.

So once I had proved that to myself then I wanted to move on again. So I've had some understanding and engagement with many of the different sectors now, with the corporate sector, with the NGO sector, political sector, and with the government sector where I've worked on some change projects within government ministries. The last few years have been a look at how we pull these different pieces together.

### **An Experiment in a Complex Change Initiative**

In 2009 we engaged in the 2020 Climate Leadership Campaign, led by the State of the World Forum, and aiming to engage policy makers, business and citizens in a commitment to achieve 80% CO2 reduction by 2020.

We worked on a three-day event that ended up being about 240 people from different sectors of society and different countries, 90 international and the rest were Brazilians, a mix of context and sectors of society, and a mix of age groups. So quite a diverse group of people looking to create some coherence - not just connection to a vision although that's a very important prerequisite but a shared framework for collaboration on what we need to work on.

80% reduction in CO2 from pre-industrial levels by 2020 was an ambitious target, one which none of the political community are really talking realistically about but which a significant percentage of the scientific community say is what actually needs to happen if we're going to keep the planet under 2 degrees warming. When we got there, we were challenged by the location, which wasn't ideal, as well as by the leadership of the initiative which was very emergent, to put it politely - moving targets, changing contexts, a changing landscape pretty quickly. There was little

which we could rely on as being fixed, down to the last minute really. We were designing and adapting on the fly as we went.

In the design team itself, of course, there were different interest and perspectives. People get to meet each other a few days before the event and then we have a pre-design. We had to get to know each other and get a process that would work for the diversity of participants and the ambitious goals of the campaign.

*BB: How did you design that initiative?*

PM: Probably the first important step was that we actually made a decision to bring together the key international process team for a few days to generate some coherence between the different players in the team. What's our understanding of the project? Why do we think it's important? How do we understand change? During that process what we were really doing was discovering shared values, exploring principles for this kind of work, and that really created a field between the different players which meant that from that moment on and up to and through the event, we were pretty coherent with each other. It means you'd say things and you'd understand each other because we'd actually looked at where our underlying assumptions were behind the decisions that we were making.

*BB: What do you mean by a field?*

PM: It's based on an assumption that whenever a group of people come together, align behind a shared purpose, that there is an identity or a collective that emerges in the space in between that actually can transcend and include the different players who are part of it. That field can be more or less coherent depending on how aligned the players are, in particular how connected they are at the heart level with each other and with the shared purpose which they have.

So we spent a few days in Amsterdam, which was important working together. In the run up to the event itself, I just sat down, tuned in to what I felt was the intention that we put out there and the field that we'd created, and wrote an initial design. I'm working from a paradigm which assumes that there is a field of information about a collective endeavor which you can connect to outside of time and space. If you come into resonance with that field of information, you can download what's there. So even though it was me writing that first three-day design, I felt I was doing it in the context of the groups that were tuning into that intention.

Having written that design and come up with the initial concept, we then threw it back and forth a bit between the players of the design team. I was interacting more with the content team which Jim Garrison was primarily leading. There were some interesting tensions there between a process to put in place conditions for ongoing collaboration and a more political need to have certain people speak and be seen and have a role to play at the event. We were looking for as much interaction, ownership and engagement as possible and that had to be balanced with a need for example for the governor of the state to speak so that they have a buy-in to the project, which is of course a legitimate motivation. I think I would still question whether doing that in a working conference of experts is appropriate or not.

So we threw things back and forth a bit in the run up to the event so we have a basic design, a first version by the time we go to Brazil. In Brazil have about three or four

days to work together - the core team who were in Amsterdam, plus about four or five other people who joined that team and were really high quality people.

What needs to happen is that that team now needs to come into coherence and that meant that we had to spend time again looking at how do we see this event, what do we see as being its purpose, why are we involved anyway, what role do we see ourselves playing, what's our understanding of this whole question around climate change, what's our understanding of change in general at this kind of event.

*BB: How did you come up with the initial design again?*

PM: For the very first version I just kind of sat down and basically, as I would say, tuned in to that field of information I was describing (what Rupert Sheldrake would call a morphogenetic field) gathered around the event and the intention of the initiative. I would simply come into a balanced space in myself, a quick meditation, ground myself, tune in, and then just write out a design. That was our starting point. So at first I just sat down and tuned in and then wrote what I thought would be a useful design, trusting that it was coming out of a collective field.

*BB: And then you took that design and put it in front of the group?*

PM: So that design we then shared internally in the process team, got some more insights, and then shared it with the content team and continued to evolve it. That was before we actually went to Brazil. The latest version we had, is what we then shared with that broader group in Brazil as a starting point.

*BB: How did you what to do for the design itself? How did you determine what was needed?*

PM: In first phase when I was tuning in, it was really just a question of does this feel right, does this resonate with me, and making sure that I'm aligned to the purpose and intention of the initiative. Does it feel resonant or do I experience tensions in my body about any of it or does my system feel at ease? That's my indicator of does this seem to be the right thing for this step in the knowledge that as we move forward it will evolve. Does this feel right for now? So it was more a felt sense of this feels okay.

With the process team, because we had that alignment already, any adjustments that were made flowed pretty easily because in a way they seem self-evident, obvious. What we noticed was that as we connected to the content team who hadn't been part of the original meeting in Amsterdam (they were originally going to be and then the last minute plans changed), the kind of response or proposals that they would make were so out of synch with the principles that we were working from, that that conversation couldn't really be had until we're actually face to face in Brazil.

My approach at that time was to keep people happy enough for us to feel like we were progressing until we actually got to be face to face in Brazil. Certainly the design we had when we went to Brazil I felt wasn't ideal. However I trusted that when we actually sat down together and we'd be able to get to something which would be the best we could do.

*BB: And how much did the design shift throughout the preparation in Brazil and course of the event itself?*

PM: When we got to Brazil we had people who hadn't been part of the design with lots of very useful insights and perspectives. We had to work a lot on the coherence of the enlarged design team and that happened through actually trying to work concretely on the design, not by sitting down and doing a kind of sharing around of what do you believe is the most important thing in the world. As you work on things you notice when things seem to flow and when things get stuck. And when things get stuck, that's normally a sign that somebody has a different opinion.

The question is, is that opinion coming from a free, informed place where it's aligned with the intention of the event and is therefore useful information to take into account? Or is there some shadow element that's been lit up or irritated by something that's happened? Which means you've got more of a contracted response. You need to be able to distinguish between that, and keep the whole design moving forward while on the one hand feeding in useful information and on the other hand mirroring back not so constructive influence. That process is what created the broader coherence in the group. We got to learn more about each other's perspectives, more about each other's values and understanding. We informed each other, so we really did create something that I don't think none of us could have created on our own.

It wasn't always easy because you're having to hold a tension field a lot of the time and you can feel somebody speaking and tension building in the rest of the group because it's not coherent. You then have to hold the space for that tension to exist and allow the information to emerge out of the tension, information that's going to be useful so that everybody who's part of that experience can then relax into the emergent insight that's come through. That whole process was a great experience for me to be hosting.

So after each day of the event we then sat down with that design team. And, of course, that's always a risk because you're tired often after a day and you're then going to sit down and it could take two or three hours of event design work. But because we'd spent that time together, it meant that there was enough coherence for us to be able to carry that. So it did evolve. In fact, for the third day, we planned something completely different to what we actually did.

What we were looking for was to create a shared framework for collaboration of key areas to work on and key success conditions for each of those areas, with ratings and rankings to be filled in. Like we experienced in the design team, the participants were having to balance different perspectives and opinions and agree on something. It was a convergence process that was looking to squeeze something out of our collective intelligence while honoring each of the individuals in that process.

That brings up a lot of tension in people because things get lit up by other people who they're having a conversation with and there isn't a lot of time to process that. So the energy was really high at the end of the day. And there was a little rebel group who broke away and had a really great conversation that evening as they explored their tensions. Others were complaining that they hadn't had the chance to say their thing. Some people had shown up primarily because they wanted their project to be profiled - they wanted their thing. So we were trying to focus on balancing the intention and purpose of the collective initiative with the needs of the individuals.

It was very clear suddenly to me that evening of the second day that we should just do Open Space. Open Space Technology is a way which enables people to put on the agenda, the things which they feel passionate about at that moment. So we asked the question, now that we've got this framework for collaboration, what are the different actions that you could imagine people taking in order to move forward in any of these conditions? And Open Space proved to be the perfect form which allowed us to channel all the different energies that were in the room so that people could offer their thing. They would find out whether anybody else was interested or not, because it would depend if anybody showed up to their workshop. This avoided them feeling they had to sabotage the process as a whole because they hadn't said their thing, and in any case, who are we to know whether it was going to be useful or not? So what Open Space allowed for is the system to respond to that offering and to see whether it did create resonance for a lot of people who were there.

*BB: Then it's a nice connection to the second topic: what sort of tools or modules or processes did you draw upon to design the initiative?*

PM: For many years I have been inspired by Dee Hock's work on what he would call chaordic organization and chaordic design which is trying to create this balance between chaos and order, so just enough structure for the self-organization to work effectively. His context was creating VISA international when he was frustrated with the traditional banking world. The approach makes sure that whatever you're trying to do is rooted in a clear need in the world. So what's the need that this impulse is a response to, becoming conscious of that. That informs your purpose which is an answer to the question, what is it we jointly want to become, which is different to what do we actually want to *do*, what do we want to *become*? That creates the soul of the initiative, its essence.

The chaordic design then gets more and more concrete as you work down. If this is the purpose, then what are some of the key principles we need to live by in order to be able to manifest that purpose? And what that might begin to look like in a concept, visioning work, who are the people involved, what's the core product, what's the main output, and the very last thing you do is ask what structure is appropriate to be able to manifest that vision, serve those people, live by those principles to achieve that purpose and serve the need in the world. That was core to the design from the beginning. Any times that we were getting stuck on structure we could go back up that scale for as far as where we needed to go – for example, this stuckness is because we're not living by one of the principles that we said we were going to live by. Or this conversation is actually informing our understanding of the principles, in which case we need to adapt the principles.

The chaordic model and practice was an important part of what we were doing. Of course, it was a collaboration between State of the World Forum and the Integral Institute, so the integral model was key. We were looking at how to access as many different dimensions of people as possible? In doing that we're likely to get the richest information about what needs to be done but also resonate with different dimensions of people which means that we would create greater conditions for ongoing collaboration in the knowledge that you're not going to get this alignment only through the head.

As part of an integral approach we were looking at stages of development. So who are the people? We actually had somebody get the full guest list, which by the way, was almost the evening before. We had somebody who knew the people who were

coming, do a little analysis about where do we think they're coming from in terms of their stage development, their value systems and cognitions, and a check on whether the work forms that we had come up with were appropriate to match those value systems.

The Art of Hosting was another important approach. This is about how to create, design and hold space in collective strategic and meaningful conversations? There's a number of practices which are often used in an art of hosting context such as World Café and Open Space Technology that I talked about before. The most important practice from World Café is really built on that Bill O' Brien quote about the state of the intervener determining the quality of the intervention. It's actually the quality of the space the facilitator is holding in themselves that's going to create the quality of space for the participants. There was an interesting moment, actually, which I shall tell you about in a minute, for me in that.

As well as the Art of Hosting practices, there was the energetic balancing work. From the beginning we decided that we would try to put into practice some leading edge work we were exploring. We were just beginning to learn about how subtle energies work in a collective. We actually hired the Centre for ECOtherapy in the Netherlands to assess the project energetically at the start of the project in February and see what the likelihood was of it being able to be at its energetic peak in time for the event and have them balance the project as we went through.

They look at the different kinds of energies currently gathered around this initiative, using the Reichian concepts of "orgone" which is like chi or life energy, "dor" which is dead or blocked energy and "oranur" which is stressed energy. It also explores the question of how integrated the vision is, how embodied in the actual practice; and given the scale of the challenge, how connected is the project to the relevant information fields? Does it have all the information it needs to be able to do what it's trying to do and how do we facilitate the the potential into the manifestation?

Every day there would be five days a week they would be balancing and we would tune in around some affirmations and intentions we had for the event. The funny thing is that when we got to Brazil we found out that they've been doing a similar thing - working with kind of Reiki, to balance and prepare for the event. That was very interesting coherence at a distance! During the event itself, we had people energetically holding space, the kind of practices where you tune into the field of the event, you feel the energy of the event in your body and should you feel any tensions then within your body, you allow those tensions to be released and relaxed and trust that that will also then play out in the collective context.

Those then were some of the methods.

### **An Experience of the Heart**

You may know the Bill O'Brien quote about the interior state of the intervener determining the quality of the intervention. Day one of the event was essentially designed by the content team and was mainly speakers most of the day, which we tried to warn against and ended up just having to sacrifice that day to allow us to have two days for our own process. We did a little piece at the end of the day around vision, but by the end of the session there was a lot of tension in the room and a lot of moaning from people.

I found myself in a space the evening before and when I woke up in the morning feeling like we had to just drive this process through and these people would just have to play along and get on with it and stop complaining like they were and just grow up and be adult human beings, that kind of energy. In my meditation that morning, I remembered the Bill O'Brien quote. I think one of my team actually said something to me about it too when I was talking at breakfast. So I went back to my room and when I tuned in, I felt my heart was very closed and cramped, closed to the participants. I was in a slightly aggressive mood towards the participants, annoyed and frustrated at them for being so pathetic and moaning and whining.

So I practiced opening my heart to the participants and feeling love and compassion for all of them - for the reason they'd come, knowing that they were all here, they all had a role to play, that they'd all sacrificed something to be here, that they were all trying to do the best they could for the earth at this time. That really shifted my own space, which meant that when I entered the space to facilitate in the morning, I was able to make a very heartfelt connection to each of the participants in the room and not feel any defensiveness or need to justify or push anything that we were doing, to hold it as an invitational space. That reinforced in me the importance of the individual practice of any host or facilitator who is trying to hold space for a collective. If you follow the spiritual teachings of what lies inside manifesting outside or the outside as a reflection of the individual, then the quality of the collective initiative that we can create reflects the interior quality that we can generate in ourselves. My experience illustrated the truth in that.

### **Practicing Non-attachment and Emergence**

*BB: So tell me some more about your experience of the design itself, your personal internal experience of the design.*

PM: What was key to me was the preparatory event in Amsterdam because it felt like after that there was a community of people who were aligned around the same intentions. I was very relaxed really, in the whole design process, for a number of reasons. One of them is just knowing that when we show up in Brazil there is such a great group of people who have enough consciousness to be able to sit and come up with something on the spot which would serve the initiative as a whole - that whatever we did we'd be able to pull off something that would be good because of the quality of people and the connection that we had. So in that sense I was feeling very trusting of the community that we created.

More fundamentally, I always start from a basic assumption which is that whatever happens is ultimately all that could have happened. It doesn't mean we don't do anything or prepare but there's a ground of being in which everything is already fine just as it is which makes it much lighter and clearer, allowing an openness to new information or tensions so that my system or my ego doesn't contract when something comes in that isn't immediately in alignment with how I would want to do it. If a tension is coming in and there's a reason for it to come in, my system, rather than contracting, will go into inquiry mode. What is this? Why has it shown up now? What does it have to tell us about what we're trying to do? What does it have to tell me about who I am and what I'm trying to do?

Before we went to Brazil, I was able to hold the tension with the content team fairly lightly in the knowledge that when we got to Brazil, we could have some more fundamental conversations and clear up anything that was there. When we did get to

Brazil it was interesting because sometimes I noticed in the process team, and I would get caught up in this as well, there was a kind of innate criticism or judgement on some of the content leadership, with frustrations like "Are we ever going to be able to get a good process together when they don't really understand what we're trying to do? They don't get it..."

The funny thing was that every time one of those judgments arose in me, it was almost instantly disproved that day or the day after through some kind of interaction with that person. It was really amusing. I would find myself caught up in a judgment and then that person would do or say something which completely blew away that judgment I had of them.

For me during the event, that was also very much a growth process around noticing my own judgments that come out of contraction and irritation. It helped then to remember that everybody who was there and committing to doing this kind of work has the best intention. They may have their own stuff which is getting in the way, their own shadow. I was learning more a compassion for people, learning to watch my judgments, to look for the essence of people and see the goodness that is in them as they are trying to do the best they can given what they know and who they are and everything else that has happened to them in this life or another life that may be getting in the way.

It was particularly after I'd had that experience in the morning with that heart-opening, that I was riding a wave of energy. It was a total feeling of being in flow. Even though I could see that what we were doing was generating tensions in certain places and some people weren't happy with it, that felt completely okay. In fact, some of the what happened as a result of those tensions has actually been extremely meaningful to a lot of people, and I believe to the work more broadly beyond this initiative.

So I learned a lot. We, as the Center for Human Emergence, the facilitation team, grew immensely in that experience. We learned a lot about who we actually are and what our work is because it was the first time that others had seen us doing it. People would comment. One person actually said, "I've been greatly touched by the organizational culture of the Center for Human Emergence. Just being in their presence transforms you". That was the first time that we'd really been aware of the fact that we even had a culture! It was a good mirror for us.

For me, I concluded that this was probably the best I could do at that level with what we had. That enabled me to then go, okay, if this is what we can do, then what are the implications of that moving on? What are the principles of what we were doing and how might that be useful in other contexts?

### **A Next Step**

*BB: So reflecting upon your work as a whole, how would you describe your current approach to designing social or environmental sustainability initiatives?*

PM: Actually, that's evolved also since the event in Brazil. I think what I'm realizing is, if I was to use spiral dynamics terms, I've been working a lot out of yellow for the last few years, where the intention is working out how to integrate all these different separated parts, pull them together, help them work together to achieve certain objectives and goals which serve the good of the whole – people and planet. It's

almost an engineering mentality at one level because you're looking at all the pieces and you're working out what we need to do to connect this to that, and so on.

What I noticed at some point, is that the complexity actually gets too much for your cognitive mind to hold. Not only did I get lost in the complexity but I found myself living at a pace that certainly wasn't the speed of life; more like the speed of light. At some point my system started rebelling - something's not quite right about this. It felt like a lot of effort. It was like the ego was getting excited by the scale at which you're working - all these different pieces, almost like a computer game where you're trying to pull things together.

At some point I felt a need to stop. It was all too fast; there must be a simpler way. I reached a kind of saturation point in that cognition or value system where at some point I felt I needed some space to think about what's next and explore if there was another way to do this. What I was beginning to realize is that there's a big difference between whether you put your attention on the parts of a system and try to work out how to connect them up and weave them together, or whether you start from the basic assumption that those parts are already whole in that relationship to each other and you put your attention on the whole rather than the parts.

That shifts everything. Somehow it makes it a lot easier and a lot simpler. Parallel to that is a more conscious discovery of what this energy work is about. It's really about working with the space in between the parts, rather than putting attention on the parts themselves, and trusting that if we get the conditions right, these different parts of life will naturally organize themselves into the relationships that they need to be in. I'm seeing a lot of parallels in individual healing. Look at individual healing practices. Normally, they don't get into your body and try to stitch this together with that or reconnect that. What they do is they channel life force or healing energy into your system and then your system, infused with that energy, realigns itself. The body is too complex for us to know how to pull everything together - I think that's part of the problem with modern medicine.

It's the same with the kind of the societal challenges that we're facing right now. It's a systemic law that the complexity of the life conditions need to be matched by the requisite diversity of the system itself. The complexities that we're facing today are requiring a level of diversity in terms of players who need to work together to deal with them, which we've never had to do before. I have a sense that if we can learn how to put our attention on the field as a whole that holds these different entities and enable that field to be as resonant as possible with life energy, then the parts of that field will start to organize themselves naturally the way they need to, in the same way that the body heals itself when it's infused with a healing energy.

So that's a learning edge. It's where my inquiry is right now. I believe that what we were doing before, what we call meshworking, is still extremely valuable, and you need people to work at that level of the parts. I'm also seeing a perspective which you can work from that I think would greatly enhance our ability to create impact rapidly and more effortlessly than we've been trying to do before. There is less ego involved, as we're more of a channel for life to do its thing rather than the person who's going to save the world.

*BB: So in this leading edge approach of yours, how do you identify the intervention points for change in the system?*

PM: I have to say that I have only just started to apply this approach. I'm applying it at the moment to my own household, my family, as part of the second year of the training which I'm doing. The way it works, if you take this leading edge approach is that essentially, any system, any time a bunch of people get together with a shared intention, creates a field. We take that as a basic starting-point. It creates a system which we could call a holon. It's a bounded system which has an identity to it, some kind of higher purpose, in the same way that an ecosystem has a boundary to it. This work actually started more in the biology and ecology domain. What they found is that if you take a forest, for example, you can connect to the fields of that forest and get information from it. You can do that at a distance by just having a photo or a map of the forest.

In the same way, if you have an organization or a collective of people committed together to achieve something, you can create a holon with a boundary for that system. It's very simple actually. If you follow the work at Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research which they did for over 28 years, showing that human intention can impact matter through random event generators we can assume that there is a field of information – the morphic field, as Rupert Sheldrake calls it. So take those discoveries and a lot of the quantum physics understanding of reality, and ask what the implications are. At any point you can connect to the information field of that forest and you can ask information about it. You can ask information about its health in terms of the kinds of energy that are present, the level of life energy or orgone or chi and the level of blocked energy or stressed energy. You can look at its ability to respond and adapt to stress. Is it healthy enough to be able to deal with a changing situation or not? You can look at the integration between its potential, its information field, and its physical form.

That gives you a starting point to be able to assess a system and track its progress over time. By coming into yourself and finding a place where you're still and connected through your heart to that system, you come into a resonance with it, and you can ask it what it needs. With this ecotherapy work, you work with toolbox of different treatments, ranging from specific symbols or signs to Bach Flower Remedies that have a certain resonance in them to an orgone generator which is a very simple tool that channels life energy into a system, to simply holding healing for the system. You simply have a checklist and use, for example, a pendulum, to ask a system what it wants and then it will tell you what it needs, how often it needs the treatment, and in what dose.

What you're doing is you're putting your attention on the whole. It's not so much a question of intervention points within the part, but how do you heal the system as a whole in such a way that the parts can organize themselves in the way that's going to be as life-affirming as possible. It's different working from a more (Spiral Dynamics) yellow perspective, where we would talk a lot about acupuncture points and systemic leverage points.

Now I'm getting a sense that there's another approach where you don't have to work that out for yourself. What you need to do is put in place the conditions for the system to be able to heal itself.

*BB: Fascinating. So at its deepest level of meaning to you, what is it that you do? What is the essence of your work? What are you doing on the deepest level?*

PM: I was thinking about this the other day. I asked myself that question a few years ago. I used to call myself an evolutionary change facilitator, which meant I'm always facilitating change based on the principles of the way life works or evolution works. And then we were coming back from a Spiral Dynamics confab in the US. I was with Anne-Marie, one of my colleagues, and she was talking about marketing, saying it's funny that marketing as a concept has only been around for 60 years, yet it's everywhere; people study in marketing, every organization has a marketing unit. So I pondered, what's the equivalent of that then for the kind of work which we're doing? What's our profession?

To explore that, I asked myself, what is the basic nature of the universe? Everything is connected and it's all moving in a general direction. So really all we should be doing in our work is helping stuff to connect up and move in the right general direction of life or spirit or however we want to frame it. So what's the word that describes interconnecting and releasing life force? I sat with it for a few weeks.

One day this word came in, synnervate. I'd heard of "enervate" as a word which means to suck the life force out of something. From my Latin I knew that 'e' meant out so that "nervate" must be something positive to do with life force. I looked "nervate" up and it's a biological term which refers to sap flowing through the veins of plants and trees and everything else. Hey, that's the life force bit! And 'syn' we know means to interconnect. So that we have it: to interconnect and to vitalize.

That's the essence of my work: to help stuff connect up and release its life force so that it can do what it's here to do in the general context of planetary and universal evolution. Those two basic principles of making sure that what needs to be connected is connected so that life energy unfolds and is released. Interconnecting and vitalizing. So I'm a synnervator.

*BB: And how do you bring that essence to the design process?*

PM: Actually, that's interesting. I think it's really through ensuring that the relationships between the people in the design team are as aligned and clear as possible. When you get a group sitting around in a circle or at a table with a shared purpose, then you can create a context where they're feeling connected to each other, where there is a commitment to a higher goal and where the individual contractions or egos aren't showing up to disturb the process. Then insights emerge in that space, which none of us could have thought up individually. Through creating a field of relationships between the people who are inquiring into a certain question around let's say a design, the life force or spirit flows through that collective and informs that collective about what we should be doing. Any individual in that circle can presence that information. You have a sense that when people speak, it immediately resonates with everybody else. So it's actually information coming out of the center of that field, not any individual's idea.

That's really how we apply synnervation or interconnecting and vitalizing in the design process, is the ability to hold a space. It's like that piece in the Bible where Jesus said that whenever two or more people come together in my name, there I shall be? When we actually show up together in a sacred space which is committed to and aligned with a higher purpose that's for the good of humanity or the planet, then divine energy is present and informs us in our questions and quests. The quest creates a tension, and that tension is healed or whole-d by the divine energy.

*BB: So what's the inner place from which you operate when designing sustainable initiatives?*

PM: The inner place is actually an interface between what I described earlier as the ground of being, a kind of universal sense of oneness (or absolute reality, heaven, Sacred Father), this sense of oneness where everything is already perfect just as it is, and the connection to the earth, which I see as let's say the Sacred Mother or the feminine – the material, relative context of the earth where we are right now that we've chosen to incarnate into. So a connection being held in a way in that absolute context of the oneness and then tuned into the energy of the earth.

So the space is the interface, a creative space between those two, between the sense of oneness and that sense of purpose for the earth. If I'm aligned with those two, there's an impulse that wants to do something. What is that and where does that want to go? That's in myself and then when I'm with others, again, that combination, a combination of purpose and direction given that we are trying to actually achieve something here, and openness to information or insights that may be coming from other people or other sources. That's the chaordic, where the order is given by the purpose or the focus and the chaos is brought in by whatever shows up in the moment that is looking to be integrated.

*BB: So shifting just here a little bit, what guiding principles or design principles do you follow when you design?*

PM: I think I probably covered a lot of them in the chaordic design piece. Making sure that we're rooted in a real need, resonant with that we have a clear sense of purpose, of what we want to become, that we have a set of principles that we resonate with and hold ourselves and each other accountable to, that we already pay attention to the resonance and alignment between the people who are involved in the initiative and that any time a tension emerges in that field, that we name that and check it and explore it, and look to see what that has to tell us.

When we have that kind of space together, we can trust that we will know what to do next. We do not try to plan everything down to the minute details for the next few years but in the knowledge that the moment we take a step, we change reality, and reality changes with us, which is a simple principle of quantum physics. That means we need to be acting then stopping and sensing again and then acting and stopping and sensing again. So it's a process of continually acting with full commitment - this is what we feel needs to be done now; it feels right for this moment. We don't know what outcome it's actually going to generate. So there's another principle which is a lack of attachment to results or outcome. It feels like the right thing to do now. Boom! We do it and then we stop again and we look. Well, what's the state of things now, now that we've done that? And how does that inform what we need to do next? We stay as close as possible to the present moment, to the present reality and allow ourselves to be informed by that in terms of our next step. This is quite different to a predict and control model where you attempt to predict what's going to happen and then steer your project along that line.

It's quite difficult when you're trying to write funding proposals and they want to evaluate you on the progress because you don't actually know what your markers will be. The power of it is not actually knowing what the outcomes are going to be, but aligning yourself behind an intention and then having a disciplined practice with each other about how you go about it; trusting that whatever comes out will be the

kind of thing that does need to come out because there's so many other dimensions at work. It's not just you working on a sustainability initiative. Everything in that sustainability initiative relates to all sorts of other stuff, and all that other stuff is also moving. We can't predict what's going to happen when we do something. We can't say when we make that intervention and this will happen and that won't happen. In my experience and understanding that is not the nature of reality. We have to learn to lead these initiatives in different ways which are more emergent, closer to the present moment and more open to uncertainty, with less attempt to control and plan.

### **Advice to Future Sustainability Leaders**

BB: So if you could share three pieces of advice to tomorrow's sustainability leaders about how to design effective sustainability initiatives, what would you say?

PM: Know that the success of the sustainability initiative is largely dependent on your own interior state. Make sure you have a good personal practice that helps you to stay centered and be as available as possible. Really work on the relationships of the people who are holding the core of the initiative. In my experience it's what you create with the core team in your work together that will manifest in the initiative. You are a fractal of what you create in your team. Work on yourself, work on the relationships within the core team, and make sure those are as clear and resonant as possible.

And don't take yourself too seriously. Have fun. Enjoy. It's life. Ultimately, what we're doing is we're trying to create more life-affirming environments and if we start getting all serious about it, then we lose touch with the life force in ourselves. So remember to enjoy the music rather than just analyze it the whole time. If it's not enjoyable and if you're not getting energy from it, then you're not doing the right thing. Either there's something up in yourself or you're on the wrong track. Anytime your enjoyment indicator drops down, that's the signal to stop and check what's happening.

BB: Is there anything else you'd like to add about how to design sustainability initiatives?

PM: Don't over-design. Design as much as possible in the moment, as close as possible to events themselves. Don't design too far out. The closer you can be to whatever it is you're designing for in time and space, the better. We can approach the initiative as a living entity that has its own dynamic and could do with help rather than being an object to design, manipulate or engineer, looking at how can you build a resonant relationship with the initiative. See it in a second person relationship rather than a third person relationship. Then I think we're likely to be far more effective and connected to what actually wants to happen rather than what we think should happen.

And walk your talk. If you're working on a sustainability initiative, be as sustainable as possible yourself in the materials you use for the event, in the location you choose for the event, in every way. If you say you're doing work for the earth, then you have got to show it in your own lifestyle and in the conditions you create for the event. And no excuses that it's not out there. There's enough sustainable products and services out there now - you've just got to look for it.

BB: Okay. Thank you.

PM: My pleasure. Thank you.

END

**Barrett Brown** has worked in a dozen countries in the areas of leadership, sustainability, organization development, and communications. He currently serves as Senior Manager – Learning & Development for the Dutch Sustainable Trade Initiative where he builds learning systems to accelerate social and environmental sustainability in global supply chains.

He has helped launch a dozen companies and NGOs, facilitated multi-stakeholder initiatives involving Global 100 companies, led executive teams through strategic alignment, and developed multi-year leadership development programs. Barrett specializes in the intersection between organization development, leadership development, and global sustainability.

A member of Integral Institute since 2002, Barrett is deeply experienced in the application of the Integral framework - a comprehensive map of systems, culture, psychology and behaviour used worldwide at the highest levels of business, government and civil society. He holds an MA and a PhD in Human and Organizational Systems from Fielding Graduate University.

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He has worked in and across different sectors. His experience includes facilitating integral change processes in multinational corporations, and government ministries, and in multistakeholder initiatives with global stakeholders. He has also spent many years in the not-for-profit sector. Recent multistakeholder projects focus on MDG5 (Maternal and Newborn Health with WHO), climate change and biodiversity.

He is a recognised expert in the field of evolutionary systems dynamics. He has had his first book published in English and Dutch (Evolutionary Leadership). He is an experienced designer of learning processes and host of collective inquiry and collaboration. He also has a background in theatre, rugby and folk music.

Having experienced the limits of more traditional approaches to societal change, his current focus is on researching the application of noetic science, geomancy and quantum physics to whole systems transitions. As part of this, he is a PhD student with [Wisdom University](http://www.wisdomuniversity.org) and in the advanced stages of [ECOtherapy](http://www.ecotherapy.nl) training.

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