Reflections: In Praise of Silent Transformation – Allowing Change Through 'Letting Happen'

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ABSTRACT   *Change is a ubiquitous notion that fascinates and frustrates. The starting point for most attempts at theorizing change begins with the philosophical assumption that stability and equilibrium are fundamental features of reality. Organizational change, therefore, is construed as something exceptional requiring active intervention on the part of actors. Change has to be carefully 'managed' because it is something made to happen to or within an 'organization'. This, however, is not the only way of understanding organizational change. From an alternative process-philosophical outlook, all of reality is change so that it is the phenomenon of organization itself that is a remarkable achievement. From this process outlook, 'organizations' are nothing more than stabilized patterns of relations forged out of an underlying sea of ceaseless change. In this paper, I make a distinction between 'owned' and 'unowned' processes of change. I show that acknowledging the pervasive presence of 'unowned' change processes leads to the adoption of a more benign approach to managing change; one in which 'letting happen' take precedence over active intervention. Managing change then is more about small, timely and quiet insertions made to release the immanent forces of change always already present in every organizational situation. Change then appears unexceptionally as a naturally occurring phenomenon; it does not attract undue attention and does not generate unnecessary anxieties. Obliqueness of engagement is key to managing sustainable change in a world that is itself ever-changing.*

KEY WORDS: Unintended consequences, unowned processes of change, becoming, negative capability, propensity of things, sunao mind

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Introduction

> ... when we look at the field of change we do not see a single community of scholars and practitioners attempting to understand and develop the study and practice of change. Instead, we see a sea populated with islands, atolls, reefs and a lot of individuals madly paddling boats between them who are frustrated by the fact that no one seems to speak the same language or see the world in the same way. (By, Burnes, & Oswick, *Journal of Change Management*, 2011, p. 5)

> We speak of change .... We say that change exists ... but ... we reason and philosophize as though change did not exist. *In order to think change and see it, there is a veil of prejudices to brush aside.* (Bergson, 1946/1992, p. 131, my emphasis)

The predicament raise by the editors of the *Journal of Change Management* juxtaposed with the admonition of the French process philosopher Henri Bergson aptly captures the apparent contested state of current theorizing on the nature of change. But rather than lament the seeming lack of unity and coherence in the change management literature perhaps this state of affairs itself is indicative of the multiplicity and changefulness of social reality, including especially in the world of academic theorizing on change itself; one that implicitly acknowledges a notion of change, not as something that should be brought under 'control', but as something that is in fact uncontrollable and hence must be 'allowed' to realize its own potential. This incurs a measure of discomfort amongst many Western management theorists for whom it is most 'natural and normal to meet the world head-on' (Jullien, 2000, p. 7) and for whom active doing is more instinctively preferred than passively 'letting happen'. Allowing change to occur of its own accord, on the other hand, constitutes a much more indirect form of intervention, in that the quiet insertions subsequently made are more dependent on timeliness and selectivity of engagement rather than on the weight or superiority of force needed. It is this notion of apparently effortlessly 'letting change happen' that I wish to pursue here.

The concern for an arguably premature unification and to somehow conceptually arrive at a 'same way of seeing the world' in organizational change theory is understandable but it is also potentially counterproductive for much of the inadequacies of current theorizing derives precisely from an unchallenged set of philosophical premises that are at odds with a truly changeful way of understanding change. Despite the initially useful distinction made between Planned and Emergent theories of change much of what is written in both of these change perspectives (although the work of Weick, 2001, 2009 is a notable exception) remain ontologically tied to a worldview in which it is presumed that it is social entities, things such as organizations that change. Change then, by default is construed as that which happens to/in an organization. This is, however, not the only way to theorize change, and by implication how change ought to be 'managed'.

In this reflective piece, I attempt to show that embracing changefulness as a natural, global feature of social reality may release us from the Cartesian anxiety associated with the cultivated penchant for stability, order, certainty and control. Such an alternative changeful worldview jibes better with the reality of

the world that we are confronted with on a day-to-day basis; one that experienced management practitioners, unlike many management academics, are much more familiar with and can instinctively relate to in their everyday dealings. Such seasoned practitioners are often intuitively aware that their own internalized 'logic of practice' is irretrievably change-oriented and time-dependent, and hence often alien to the static logic of analysis that underpins much of academic research and theorizing (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 86). It is their practical nous, acquired through having to operate in a constantly changing world that enables practitioners to cope with and respond to the exigencies of rapidly evolving situations they constantly find themselves in. Under such globally uncertain circumstances, large-scale planned changes in particular often come to grief because of the 'unanticipated consequences' (Merton, 1936) that ensue from such deliberate high-profile interventions.

In this paper, while I take sides with the emergent approach to change, I want to emphasize that it is the *relaxing* rather than incremental *constructing* of alternative organizational orders that will prove more efficacious in allowing lasting and sustainable outcomes to be realized. I also want to show that the emergent perspective is incomplete without revising our ontological presuppositions regarding the nature of organizational reality. Taking change seriously from a process-philosophical perspective implies that organization itself must be construed as an exceptional albeit temporary human accomplishment; an island of relative stability fashioned out of an underlying churning sea of change. Like the *levees* constructed to keep out the ravaging forces of the sea, 'organizations' are precarious social constructions designed to temporarily stave off and buffer the effects of relentless change always already taking place regardless of human intentions. From this process-philosophical outlook, managing change implies actively *relaxing* the established organizational order (i.e. gradually removing the organizational '*levees*') and allowing change to take place of its own volition. Change initiatives, as such, must begin locally, be low-profile, and be cognizant of the natural *propensity of things* (Jullien, 1999). Rather than visibly and assertively intervening into organizational situations to make them bend to our will, either incrementally or through large-scale planned initiatives, change is accomplished by merely *relaxing* already established organizational 'structures', 'regulations' and prescribed 'routines' so that genuinely novel ways of responding *in situ* can emerge spontaneously as a consequence of local interactions. Managing change, then, is about 'letting change happen'. Change then appears as a naturally occurring phenomenon that does not attract undue attention, alert concerns or generate anxieties. It is this indirect or *oblique* approach to managing change (Chia & Holt, 2009; Kay, 2010), including active non-action and passive waiting, that is key to successfully managing sustainable change.

Given the precarious state of affairs that genuinely characterizes much of contemporary organizational life, it becomes incumbent on management change theorists to rise to the challenge of adopting a truly changeful way of thinking about change that resonates better with real-world goings on. From a process-philosophical outlook, change always already is so that in order to truly 'manage' change, we must paradoxically 'let go' of the attempt to control and to predetermine outcomes. Managing change then consists not so much of wilfully

imposing our pre-designed order onto reality and forcibly making it conform to our will and fancy. Instead, it is about resisting this urge to confront the world 'head on'; to bide our time and 'let change happen' of its own accord.

Contemporary Theories on the Management of Change

> [T]he breathless rhetoric of planned transformational change, complete with talk of revolution, discontinuity, and upheaval, presents a distorted view of how successful change works. (Weick, 2009, p. 229)

Much of the extant literature on the management of change continues to emphasize high-profile and often 'heroic' change initiatives as a *modus operandi* in achieving desired organizational outcomes; change is thought of as an exceptional event that must be made to happen through decisive intervention. Advocates of this 'Planned' approach to change insist that radical change cannot take place gradually (Miller & Friessen, 1980; Romanelli & Tushman,1994; Tushman & Romanelli, 1985) or in a piecemeal manner (Gersick, 1991), but must be rapid, disruptive, and even revolutionary (Peters, 1989) in order for it to be effective. It is, therefore, no surprise that high-profile corporate turn-arounds (Kanter, 1983) by heroic figures such as the likes of Lee Iacocca at Chrysler (Iacocca & Novak, 1984) remains a popular approach for others to emulate. A residual 'heroism' continues to pervade much of the literature on corporate success and this popular outlook orients much of academic theorizing on the management of change. Planned change is usually associated with highly visible, 'top-down', and large-scale, system-wide initiatives involving significant disruptions such as structural reorganization, downsizing, a disruption of existing routines and/or an overall emphasis on the radical discontinuing of existing organizational practices. Despite the reservations of more thoughtful organizational scholars such as Andrew Van de Ven and others (see Chia, 1999), Lewin's (1952) three-stage process of change involving 'unfreeze–change–refreeze' remains a popular model for understanding organizational change processes (Hendry, 1996, p. 624).

In more recent times, however, an 'Emergent' approach to change has been touted as a viable alternative (Beer & Nohria, 2000; Feldman, 1989, 2000; Mintzberg & Waters, 1985; Orlikowski, 1996; Weick, 2000, 2009) to this still-dominant orthodoxy. This alternative 'Long March' (Kanter, Stein, & Jick., 1992) or 'Theory O' (Beer & Nohria, 2000) approach to managing change eschews rapid, disruptive and dramatic interventions such as downsizing, layoffs or divestment in favour of the gradual incremental development of human resources and the building of internal organizational capabilities. The Emergent perspective emphasizes a 'bottoms up' approach to change and views outcomes as the result of the cumulative and oftentimes 'piecemeal' adaptive actions taken *in situ* by organizational members in learning to cope with the exigencies of organizational situations. According to this view, change is not a linear, one-off isolated event but a continuous, open-ended and iterative process of incrementally aligning and realigning organizational priorities with an ever-changing environment (Beer & Nohria, 2000; Dawson 2003; Falconer, 2002; Mintzberg & Westley, 1992; Orlikowski, 1996; Pettigrew, Woodman, & Cameron, 2001; Weick & Quinn,

1999). As Weick (2000, p. 225) puts it well, it is about 'autonomous initiatives that bubble up internally; continuous emergent change; steady learning from both failure and success ... innovations that are unplanned, unforeseen and unexpected; and small actions that have surprisingly large consequences'. Advocates of Emergent change appear to be much more attuned to how organizational actors, through their everyday practical coping actions, react to the demands put on them by responding appropriately and meaningfully despite inherently ambiguous and ever-changing organizational circumstances.

Against the backdrop of this ongoing debate between Planned and Emergent change, Greenwood and Hinings (1996) provides a useful typography of theories of organizational change by further differentiating between whether change is *convergent* or *radical* (i.e. divergent) in character and whether it is *evolutionary* or *revolutionary* in its pace. In this regard then, planned, radical and revolutionary change sits at one extreme whilst convergent, evolutionary change sits at the other with radical, but evolutionary change and convergent but revolutionary change occupying the other two quadrants of this two-by-two matrix. The creation of such a matrix has led to more recent empirical investigations on the possibility of *radical evolutionary change* occurring in reality; i.e. the idea that seemingly innocuous and spontaneous initiatives can nevertheless cumulatively lead to dramatic and radical transformations. In their longitudinal empirical study of the fundamental transformations that took place in a church organization, Plowman et al. (2007) draw on such an insight to show how an innocuous local initiative by bored Sunday school youths to offer breakfast to the homeless at their church premises eventually led to a dramatic revival and revitalization of the latter which had hitherto appeared to be in terminal decline. The idea, therefore, that incidental and seemingly insignificant actions can nevertheless give rise to dramatic systemic changes is one that needs to be given greater attention in the management of change literature. The emphasis is on the positive *unintended consequences* of local actions. In other words, the key implication of this research finding is that successful outcomes can be attained *without any intention on the part of actors* and it is the acknowledgement of this possibility, rather than whether it is incremental or planned and large-scale that truly differentiates the Emergent approach from the Planned approach to change.

The idea that spontaneous emergence can take places of its own accord regardless of actor intentions has been well understood for quite a long while now. Already, the more recent science of complexity points us towards such a possibility. Yet, this important insight was not lost on traditional ancient minds as the following popular conventional wisdoms suggest:

> Large streams from little fountains flow, Tall oaks from little acorns grow. (Old English Proverb)

> A journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step. (Old Chinese Proverb)

What these ancient proverbs demonstrate, long before the advent of complexity science, self-organization, or even the notions of 'invisible hand' (Smith, 1759/2010) or 'spontaneous order' (Hayek, 1948) is a deep appreciation for the

unintended, nonlinear and self-propagating effects of minute changes and, therefore, for the need for rescaling our thinking about the potential ramifications of small, local, coping actions. Unintended but favourable outcomes can and often do ensue from apparently inconsequential actions taken. Thus, many social phenomena that we take so much for granted including, language, money, medieval cities, modern civil societies, and even the rise of economic order (see Chia & Holt, 2009, pp. 25–47) have all occurred spontaneously and unplanned. They are the unintended outcomes of local coping actions as the Scottish Enlightenment thinker Adam Ferguson aptly concludes in his study of civil society.

> Mankind . . . in striving to remove inconveniences, or to gain apparent and contiguous advantages, arrive at ends which even their imagination could not anticipate . . . Every step and every movement of the multitude . . . are made with equal blindness to the future, and nations stumble upon establishments, which are *indeed the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design.* (Ferguson, 1767/1966, p. 122, my emphasis).

Not only that, the issue of unintended consequences works both ways so that conversely, large-scale, high-profile and planned interventions develop a curious propensity for generating internal resistance and reactions that often work to thwart the very aims of such change efforts (Flyvbjerg, 1998; Jullien, 1999; Scott, 1998). It appears that: *the more directly and deliberately a specific strategic change is single-mindedly sought the more likely it is that such calculated actions eventually work to undermine their own initial successes, often with devastating consequences* (Chia & Holt, 2009, p. x). The downsides of deliberate, planned interventions, therefore, often far outweigh their apparent advantages of immediate, expeditious outcomes. Yet, the penchant for such large-scale interventions remains irresistible because it is intimately linked to an inherent 'heroism' prevalent in the Western collective psyche.

The Underlying 'Heroic' Approach to Managing Change

> One of the intellectual habits upon which we Anglo-Saxons pride ourselves most is that of going directly to the marrow of a subject, and when we have reached it saying exactly what we mean. (Arthur Smith, *Chinese Characteristics*, 1894, p. 63).

> The glorification of the hero-CEO remains largely unchanged in corporate America . . . the notion that a single CEO can be so critical to a company's success . . . becomes the measure of a company's willingness to embrace American-style corporate machismo. (Ho, 2009)

What quintessentially characterizes the Western (particularly American) attitude in dealing with human affairs is a cultivated penchant for direct, frontal and oftentimes dramatic action. From the heroism of Western movies to the 'Shock and Awe' approach to warfare, the glitz and glitter of presidential campaigns, the high drama of reality television, the glamour and hero-worshipping of sporting super-heroes, and ultimately, in the world of business, to the irresistible

tendency to lionize successful corporations and captains of industry for their impressive and often short-term achievements, all these are symptomatic of a deeply entrenched adulation for the dramatic, the heroic and the spectacular. Being direct, decisive, purposeful and rational are highly valued characteristics in Western societies; active doing is much preferred over passive receptivity and/or apparent reticence and inaction.

According to this still-widespread worldview, therefore, successful change is best accomplished through highly visible and oftentimes dramatic interventions. Bourgeois and Eisenhardt's (1988) study on CEO decision-making is a good example of this academic tendency to lionize the role of key decision-makers and the 'important' decisions such as 'strategic repositioning' that they make. From this perspective, organizational changes are made with the expectation of attaining quick, visible and dramatic outcomes. The typical approach favours direct, frontal engagement; (a) identify problems and obstacles to the attainment of pre-specified organizational goals; (b) face them head-on with the maximum concentration of effort, energy and resources; (c) and then decisively eliminate or overcome them in the most expedient and efficient manner possible. Given this preference for a direct, head-on approach, it is not surprising that the management of change is often expressed in heroic and/or 'spectacular' terms; such high-profile interventions seem to have become a *sine qua non* of corporate life. When success ensues, it is the decisive actions of significant individuals (usually top management) that are deemed to be causally significant in bringing about the successful state of affairs (Burgelman & Grove, 2007; Jarzabkowski, 2008), thereby leading to the inevitable eulogizing of 'visionary' leaders or 'hero-CEOs' (Ho, 2009). CEOs are assigned almost 'super-human' qualities so that their inflated bonuses almost seem justifiable. Such a Western tendency to causally assign success to the high-profile actions of identifiable individuals has been historically linked to the influence of significant changes in the method of warfare that took place in ancient Greece (Hanson, 1989; Jullien, 2000).

The ancient military scholar Hanson (1989, p. 224) maintains that, beginning from about the seventh century BC, there was a gradual shift in attitude in Greek warfare in which previously more *indirect* and *oblique* forms of engagement such as ambushes, encirclings and skirmishes was replaced by a growing preference for the direct face-to-face frontal clashing of opposing armies. Henceforth, a new structure, the *phalanx*, was introduced in which two bodies of heavily armed combatants were made to advance in tight formation towards the enemy in a head-on confrontation with the latter with no possibility of escape. This frontal and oftentimes spectacular clashing of opposing forces represented a mode of engagement that is deemed to be more decisive and hence desirable. Victory is unambiguous, costs are countable and the consequences of conquests are clear. It is well exemplified by the 'Shock and Awe' (Ullman & Wade, 2013) tactics employed in Iraq in 2003.

But this appetite for direct, dramatic forms of engagement is far more pervasive than is generally acknowledged. It is no less evident in politics where different ideologies and political views are pitted against each other regularly in parliamentary and public debates; in academic disputations where theories are rubbed against each other, in the judiciary where justice is arrived at by confronting

evidence amassed by both the prosecution and the defence against each other, in drama where the forces of good and evil are made to confront each other oftentimes with tragic/heroic outcomes, in the well-rehearsed adversarial confrontation between management and union, and in business and sports where direct competition, and the 'winner takes all' mentality remains dominant (Jullien, 2000, p. 44). The natural attitude of the democratic West, born of this ancient legacy, therefore, has been to over-credit human agency and intentionality and to instinctively eulogize individual achievements in overly spectacular terms. Such unquestioned faith in the potency of human agency provides the underlying justification and *modus operandi* for the high-profile planned approach to managing change. Yet, these attention-grabbing forms of intervention have their downsides; they often generate unintended consequences.

The Unintended Consequences of Planned, Large-Scale Change Initiatives

> The 'imperious immediacy of interest', refers to instances where the actor's paramount concern with the foreseen immediate consequences excludes the consideration of further or other consequences of the same act. (Merton, 1936, p. 901).

In a seminal paper written in the 1930s, the eminent sociologist Robert Merton explored and elaborated upon a phenomenon that had puzzled thinkers for many centuries; the underlying reason for the unanticipated consequences of deliberate, planned action. The idea that planned organizational change can very often produce unintended consequences has subsequently been noted by several organizational researchers (Armenakis & Bedeiam, 1999; Bastien, McPhee, & Bolton, 1995; Cameron, 1994; Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; Fairhurst, Cooren, & Cahill, 2002; Gilmore, Shea, & Useem, 1997; Whetten & Cameron, 1994). Yet, whilst research exists on specific forms of unintended consequences arising, such as resistance (Harris & Ogbonna, 2002), and on their influences, such as environmental disturbance (McKinley & Scherer, 2000), how and why exactly this tend to happens remains unclear. Whilst ignorance and 'error' of judgement may sometimes account for the emergence of unintended consequences, Merton crucially identified what he called the 'imperious immediacy of interest', as a particularly important cause of unintended consequences. The 'imperious immediacy of interest' refers to a tendency to be overly focused and single-minded about achieving a particular intended outcome to the exclusion of possible others. For him this over-zealous preoccupation or even obsession is what causes the unintended side-effects to arise. Somehow, the more direct and single-minded the action taken to forcibly effect a change, the more likely it is that it generates negative unintended consequences. This crucial insight on the downsides of an over-zealous and direct approach helps us to better appreciate how it is that large-scale change management approaches involving dramatic interventions often prove unsustainable and fail eventually in the longer term.

A direct confrontational approach to achieving desired outcomes, whether in warfare, politics, business, or even social relations inevitably forces a defensive response on the part of those affect. It provokes elements of internal resistance, reticence or withdrawal of cooperation that quietly works to undermine the

newly imposed order. High-profile interventions 'tears at the tissue of things and upset their (internal) coherence' (Jullien, 2004, p. 54) generating disquiet and discord hence disrupting the established harmony of situations. It pits individuals against one another, forces comparison, generates rivalry and conflict, produces tension and destructive competition that ultimately creates 'winners' and 'losers', thereby preventing the attainment of collective pre-specified goals. It divides loyalty, forces those affected to take sides, generates anxiety and eventually leads to counterproductive reactions that are ultimately directed towards self-preservation and survival rather than the collective good of the organization as a whole.

A simple example will suffice to illustrate how unintended consequences can come about through the most well-intentioned of change initiatives. In a previous industrial career spanning 17 years, some 25 years ago, the author managed a large computerized high-speed can-manufacturing plant involving three rotating shifts of workers operating 24 hours a day (7 am−3 pm, 3 pm−11 pm, 11 pm−7 am) 364 days a year (Chinese New Year being the only day that the plant stopped operating). In order to encourage and motivate each shift to perform better, the author conceived of a change programme to stimulate performance improvement involving, amongst other things, visibly displaying each shift's output for the day on a large display board at the entrance of the factory in a bid to pit one shift against the other two to encourage greater competition with the intention of raising output and productivity. In the event, the scheme backfired. Total daily output significantly declined over a period of less than a month. On a thorough investigation, it transpired that instead of a healthy competitive environment that the initiative was intended to create, each shift was unwittingly sabotaging the output of the next shift by not performing their assigned task with due diligence because they were too anxiously preoccupied with their own performance targets. A crucial step in the can-manufacturing process involved the high-speed spraying of lacquer onto the inside of soft-drink cans to prevent possible corrosion and leakage. Because of its critical nature, the nozzles of the spray guns had to be regularly cleaned to ensure a perfect spray pattern each time so that lacquer covered the entire inside of the can. As a result of the added pressure felt by each shift to perform well relative to the others, this rigorous practice of spray gun cleaning was not carried out with the same diligence as it got nearer to the time for each shift to hand over to the incoming one. Whereas previously, the incoming shift taking over could rely on the spray machines being thoroughly cleaned during hand-over so that production could continue smoothly without stopping, now there were several instances when the line had to be stopped and spray guns cleaned because the spray patterns generated by the now-uncleaned spray nozzles were creating quality problems and the cans produced during the hand-over period very often had to be scrapped. As a result, wastage went up and shift outputs actually declined rather than increase as was expected. An apparently straightforward attempt to improve performance had actually created the unintended consequence of lowering it.

At a more strategic level, Flyvberg's (1998) detailed and finely textured analysis of a failed high-profile plan to limit the use of cars in the city centre of Aalborg, Denmark in the 1990s also shows how large-scale change programmes often

generate unintended negative consequences that eventually thwarted the intended aims of the project. The scheme was conceived against a growing concern for direct action to be taken to deal with increasing city-centre traffic congestion. From the point of the decision being made, various parties with vested interests including the police, town planning consultants, the business community, public travel agencies, trade unions, the local media and even the citizenry became politically involved. Almost immediately differences arose between town planners and the bus company regarding the location and size of the bus terminal. This resulted in deeply entrenched divisions within the task force. Moreover, the local business community that had retail outlets within the planned restricted precinct feared that without a constant flow of cars coming within the city-centre area their businesses would inevitably suffer. Criticism also came from the Environmental Protection Agency who raised their concerns about the possibility of environmental hazards, resulting from the proposed construction of the bus terminal. More objections were raised by locals who maintained that the authentic charms of the old shopping streets would be destroyed by these large-scale urban renewal changes and to the existing traffic system. Cyclists were also concerned about the plan catering for their need for adequate cycle paths for their safety. Yet another source of conflict arose from the planning council's decisions, as part of this project, to ban all non-retail businesses such as banks, insurance companies and administrative offices from occupying the ground floor premises as an attempt to preserve the charms of the old city-centre streets. This raised intense objections from the former who agitated against this proposal. These and many other unanticipated reactions to the large-scale planned changes to the city centre meant that the proposed plans were subjected to no less than 11 modifications before being finally implemented in a virtually unrecognizable form. Moreover, more importantly, when eventually the changes were implemented, they did not produce the outcomes intended. Traffic increased by 8%, road accidents involving cyclists rose by 40% and noise levels and pollution rose to exceed international norms.

Large-scale planned and highly visible change initiatives, because they 'periodically' occur at one moment and not another constitute 'loud', lacerating and sometimes explosive breaches of the harmony and rhythm of things. They have an unsettling effect. They 'radicalize action and carry it to its highest intensity' (Jullien, 2011, p. 65) as in the advent of a revolution. They are inherently *wasteful* in terms of energy and effort expended. They may well satisfy the need for drama and excitement, but they are not necessarily the most efficacious in the longer terms. Moreover, because they are attention-grabbing, they lead to the neglect of other equally important but less visible aspects of human conduct. There is no acknowledgement of the importance of achieving small 'wins' in the grind of everyday life. Nor is there a cultivated awareness and appreciation, for instance, of how critical preventive measure routinely carried out help ensure those 'non-events' from occurring (Taleb, 2007). Sadly, there is an inherent *asymmetry* in the way attention tends to be distributed so much so that only visible happenings are noticed whilst those quieter actions that ensure that undesirable outcomes are prevented are systematically overlooked. Such tedious micro-practices routinely performed to ensure that things run smoothly remain for the most part unnoticed.

Yet, these are the very practices that serve as the seeds for ongoing creative change for routines practices are not just deviation-reducing devices but have a simultaneous *deviation-amplifying* effect (Maruyama, 1963); small adjustments made in response to changing local circumstances can precipitate significant and unexpected outcomes as we have seen. To appreciate the longer-term impact of these 'invisible' actions is to recognize the central role that silent, self-transformational processes play in the conduct of human affairs. To truly appreciate this, we need to re-calibrate our dominant attitudes toward change.

Re-Calibrating Dominant Attitudes towards Change

> All real change is an indivisible change. We like to treat it as a series of distinct states which form, as it were, a line in time ... If you imagine a change as being really composed of states ... You have closed your eyes to true reality. (Bergson, 1946/1992, pp. 146–147)

In a thoughtful book written some years ago, Strickland (1998, p. 14) observed that 'the problem with studying change is that it parades ... under numerous guises, such as transformation, development, metamorphosis, transmutation, evolution, regeneration, innovation, revolution and transition to name but a few'. What Strickland was getting at was the bewildering multiplicity of terms used to conceptualize change. Despite our overwhelming preoccupation and almost obsession with the notion of change it does not appear as if we have a common basis for understanding what change really means. Conceptual tensions and contradictions remain as Strickland astutely noted. For example, change as 'transformation' is hardly commensurable with the notion of change as 'transition'; 'metamorphosis', a naturally occurring phenomenon is hardly compatible with the more active and agentic notion of 'regeneration' and so on. Despite our preoccupations with change, little has been done to thoroughly examine its philosophical underpinnings. It is, therefore, unsurprising that we are unable to properly theorize change 'on its own terms' (Chia, 1999). As Bergson (1946/1992, p. 131) puts it well, 'In order to think change and see it, there is a whole veil of prejudices to brush aside'. To this end, we propose to show that the confusion rests on two contrasting and distinct views of change; that which is 'owned' and that which is 'unowned'. 'Owned' processes of change are those that are attributable to identifiable social agents, whilst 'unowned' processes of change are those that are not attributable to any identifiable agents (Rescher, 1996, p. 42). For example, the cooling of temperature or the flashing of lightning, or a change in climate are all 'unowned' processes that take place of their own accord regardless of human intentions.

Advocates of 'owned' processes of change view it as something happening to an entity. Change is what happens *to* things and is a consequence of agentic intervention. It is something epiphenomenal. Causality is, therefore, attributed to the actions of identifiable agents and it is this that fuels the heroism associated with the direct interventionist approach. As a consequence, much of what is tirelessly occurring and changing in its own right in front of our very eyes remains unseen. An alternative process-philosophical tradition that takes after the Heraclitean

emphasis on perpetual change however, also exists in the West. It is this lesser-known tradition that preoccupied the thinking of those like Bergson (1911/1998), James (1911/1996), and Alfred North Whitehead, (1929), who, like many ancient Orientals such as Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu (Chan, 1963), subscribed to a fluxing and changeful view of reality. For them it is more the Heraclitean *becoming* of things (Wheelwright, 1974) that takes precedence over the *being* of stable, self-identical states. What is continually being produced and reproduced is a consequence of 'unowned' change processes. From this theoretical viewpoint, 'there are changes, but there are underneath the change no things which change … There are movements, but there is no inert or invariable object which moves' (Bergson, 1946/1992, p. 147). Change is all there is.

This open acknowledgement of the presence of 'unowned' processes implies recognition that situations contain their own internal dynamics so that outcomes arise, not so much because of active intervention on the part of identifiable actors, but because of the ongoing reconfiguration of spontaneous self-generating processes, *independent of human intentions.* As Jullien (2011, p. 11) writes: 'We no more see the world getting warmer than we see the rivers carve out their beds, glaciers melt or the sea eat into the shore, and yet this is what is constantly happening in front of our eyes'. This awareness of the pervasiveness of 'unowned' changes, therefore, leads to recognition that the underlying *propensity of things* (Jullien, 1999) plays a key role in shaping eventualities. The potency of human actions is thus moderated and, therefore, accorded less significance than our egos would have us believe. So much so that instead of forcibly 'making things happen' to accord to our wishes, it becomes more important to discern the inherent potentiality always already at work in the configuration of social reality and then to allow it to unfold to our advantage.

'Unowned' processes of change are everywhere present yet, because they take place slowly and quietly, they remain for the most parts unnoticed. We are not naturally disposed to noticing these smallest of change so that whilst we readily talk about change, 'we do not perceive it' (Bergson, 1946/1992, p. 131). This idea, that change processes are not reducible to the actions 'of' things (what Rescher, 1996, p. 27 calls a rejection of the *Process Reducibility Thesis*), remains relatively foreign to the world of management academia where heroic agency is regularly assigned an elevated status in accounting for successes in change management. As a consequence, there is inadequate appreciation of how situations can develop their own internal momentum and interlocking logic and thus take on a life of their own regardless of human intentions. For those more steeped in a process-philosophical tradition, however, it is this heightened sensitivity to such micro-changes occurring often unnoticed at the periphery of attention that ultimately determines the chances of securing sustainable, longer-term success.

An acute sensitivity and awareness of such micro-changes always already occurring leads to an ingrained reluctance to actively intervene into human affairs prematurely and to instead allow situations to 'ripen' before quiet inconspicuous 'insertions' are made to 'allow' changes to take place. This attitude is what characterizes the traditional Oriental mind where the habituated disposition for social harmony and non-intervention is often mistakenly construed as

indicating indecisiveness and a lack of ambition and hence a debilitating setback to progress. Yet, what underpins this apparent passivity is a rich historical appreciation for an immanent potentiality always already at work in the configuration of reality at each particular moment in time. From this understanding, every kind of reality is perceived 'as a particular deployment or arrangement ... to be relied on and worked to one's advantage' (Jullien, 1999, p. 15) so much so that the need for forceful intervention is readily eschewed. Timeliness of initiation and obliquity of intervention, not magnitude of force are the keys to achieving outcomes. Such timely insertions do not create unnecessary 'ripples' or generate internal resistances since they are perceived as natural as the phenomena of growth and decay. Allowing situations to take its natural course represents an alternative attitude in dealing with world of affairs whether it is in politics, business or in the management of change. The notions of 'actively waiting for the fruit to ripen', of 'letting happen', of 'testing the ground' and indeed of embracing 'strategic ambiguity' better encapsulates this more nuanced form of intervention that implicitly acknowledges the ever-changing and transient nature of social reality.

Managing Change through 'Letting Happen'

> In order to grasp, it is necessary first to release. (Lao Tzu in Chan, 1963, p. 157)

> [O]ne must neither pull on plants to hasten their growth (an image of direct action), nor must one fail to hoe the earth around them so as to encourage their growth (by creating favourable conditions for it) ... You must *allow it to grow ... allowing* things to happen constitutes active involvement. (Jullien, 2004, pp. 90–91, emphasis original)

The penchant for a Planned and controlled approach to change reflects a deeply embedded existential desire for stability, control, certainty and predictability of outcome; for being 'on top of things'. Such a ubiquitous outlook reflects a distinct lack of what the poet John Keats calls 'negative capability': 'Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason' (Keats, in Scott, [1817] 2002). Negative capability describes the quality of being able to accept that happenings in the world are often not within our control because the world is perpetually changing, and that uncertainty, incompleteness of understanding and even lack of coherence lies at the core of all human endeavours. Human decisions and actions are therefore not so much deliberate choices as they are arbitrary ontological 'incisions' made (Chia, 1994, p. 800; Whitehead, 1929, p. 58) into the flux of reality to temporarily stabilize an ever-fluxing and changing world in order to render it more predictable and hence more liveable. Ludwig von Mises puts this human predicament well: 'uncertainty is always implied in the very notion of action ... were he [*sic*] certain, there would be no need to act' (Mises, 1949, p. 105). Actions and decisions are acts of 'cutting offs' that help produce material distinctions in reality that helps us to 'harness' the latter to achieve practical outcomes (James, 1911/1996, p. 50). Yet, precisely because this is the case, the conceptual knowledge produced therefrom is 'forever inadequate to the fullness of the reality to be known' (James, 1911/1996, pp. 78–79). This awareness of the limits and

limitations of knowledge provides us with the first inklings of why it is that 'letting happen' and 'allowing' might be a more prudent and viable strategy for managing change in a fluid and fluxing world.

Real 'unowned' change overflows static conceptual categories and strains our ability to comprehensively describe it. Take the process of *ageing* for instance. Ageing takes place globally without attracting much attention until, one day, with some shock we notice in the mirror its cumulative and multifaceted effects. Ageing processes are too progressive and continuous for us to easily discern because they happen as a totality. Thus:

> not only does our hair turn grey, but also bags form under our eyes, lines grow thicker, our features become heavier, our shape is weighed down and the face becomes 'like plaster' ... the complexion changes, the skin cracks, the flesh sinks and retracts ... (Jullien, 2011, p. 2)

Ageing happens quietly 'without warning, without giving an alert, "in silence" without attracting attention, and as though independently of us' (Jullien, 2011, p. 3). The process of such 'unowned' transformational change is silent and almost inexorable; it creeps up upon us with some stealth. Ageing *happens*. Similarly, the processes of the ripening of crops or even of global warming occur almost inexorably and essentially in a self-unfolding manner; changes takes place imperceptibly and unnoticed. We 'do not see the wheat ripen' even though 'we do notice its result' (Jullien, 2011, p. 8). Much of real social life changes take place in a similar way. A little reflection on our own experiences tells us that many processes of change occur silently, relentlessly and almost inexorably without our conscious awareness. In the realm of human relations such silent transformations are commonplace; they begin almost imperceptibly, as in Tolstoy's (2006) story of *Anna Karenina*.

Anna is a beautiful, aristocratic married woman from St Petersburg whose innocent pursuit of love and emotional honesty eventually makes her an outcast from society when she has an adulterous affair that catapults her into social exile, misery, and finally suicide. Her initial chance encounters and well-intended small gestures eventually led her to places she could never have dreamt of becoming; a sad, paranoid, isolated figure who eventually took her own life. Citing this as an example of how silent transformation takes place almost inexorably, Jullien (2011, p. 64) writes: 'Could Anna ... ever have imagined that she would one day break up her household and become an outcast of society and even abandon her child, so at ease did she seem?' Yet, what is so real about the tragic story of Anna Karenina is that it conveys all too well a common human predicament; the 'unexpected' breakdown of a previously loving relationship between two people in which small changes that take place ever so imperceptibly over time eventually result in hitherto unthinkable outcomes.

> [T]hose first silences, those first avoidances, or even those first lighter touches which, as the days went by, and without it having occurred to them to do anything about it, have produced an affective erosion resembling the sort of geological

erosion which suddenly causes a whole section of the cliff to collapse onto the shore. (Jullien, 2011, p. 12)

In this way, progressive differences between two people previously deeply in love with each other silently increase so that their rhythms and everyday preoccupations no longer match each other and a parting of ways becomes inevitable.

To appreciate the relentless efficacy of silent transformation is to acknowledge that an ever-present internal dynamic of circumstances, configuration, structure and momentum shapes the propensity of situations disposing them towards particular outcomes. Outcomes are born more of 'situational *disposition*' (Jullien, 1999, p. 17) than of purposeful agentic intention. This implies that *reading* situational circumstances and their propensities can enable us to make pre-emptive timely and quiet *insertions* that help guide what will naturally unfold in the fullness of time. It is to recognize that things 'tend' of themselves towards a particular outcome so that ends may be achieved quietly with no great effort needed if we aligns ourselves with this process and allow the momentum of situations, just like the flow of a river, to carry us along. *Just as a relationship or situation can willy-nilly turn sour in the most innocuous of circumstances and through a myriad of (non)gestures, similarly a relationship/situation is/can be strengthened and/or turned to advantage through concerted attention to the sustained deployment of a multiplicity of the smallest of (non)gestures in a timely and inauspicious manner.*

Such an unspectacular approach implies that the management of change adopts a *modus operandi* that eschews grandstanding overtures in preference for small, inconspicuous and seemingly innocuous insertions that do not disrupt the internal harmony of social situations. The heroic approach to change management is effort-intensive, energy-wasteful and, therefore, highly costly; much heat and friction is generated and wasted in overcoming incipient resistances. On the other hand, relying on the potential of a situation implies allowing the effect to happen irresistibly *sponte sua* so that 'with very little effort' one can nevertheless attain 'great effects' (Jullien, 2004, p. 19). There is no longer any 'need to choose . . . or to struggle to attain an "end"' (Jullien, 2004, p. 40). Outcomes are accepted by all as being essentially ineluctable so that paradoxically 'true *efficacy always seem somehow deficient*' (Jullien, 2004, p. 109, my emphasis). Just as a sound may be minimal but its sonority great, a painting profound even though it is literally bare or bland (as in Oriental calligraphy and landscape paintings), or a great ruler whose existence is paradoxically 'barely known by the people' (Lao Tzu, in Chan, 1963, p. 148), real sustainable change is all the more effective the *less noticed it is*. An incipient 'anti-heroism' inheres these paradoxical insights. Strategic organizational change, therefore, takes place not through deliberately engineering a predetermined outcome but through relaxing control and 'letting happen' much in the same way a fruit is allowed to ripen before it is plucked with a minimum of effort.

Concluding Thoughts: Ordinary Action Can Lead to Extraordinary Outcomes

A good cook changes his knife once a year – because he cuts. A mediocre cook changes his knife once a month because he hacks. I've had this knife of mine for

nineteen years and I've cut up thousands of oxen with it, and yet the blade is as good as though it had just come from the grindstone. There are spaces between the joints, and the blade of the knife has really no such thickness. If you insert what has no thickness into such spaces, then there's plenty of room ... for the blade to play about it. That's why after nineteen years the blade of mine is still as good. (Chuang Tzu, in Watson, 1968, p. 51)

In contrast to the heroic approach to managing change, we advocate here a change strategy involving a close of reading the natural coursing of things and of then strategically 'letting change happen' through quiet and effortless insertions. This entails firstly the cultivation of an aesthetic sensibility that enables the systematic discernment of minute differences and changes always already taking place in social situations and then quietly applying small, innocuous and seemingly insignificant *relaxing* manoeuvres that blend seamlessly with evolving concerns. It opts for 'lighting small fires' and achieving 'small wins' rather than for bold schemes and grand visions. Instead of imposing grand designs upon the world, we instead 'rely on the potential inherent in the situation ... (and) *allow* it to play its part' (Jullien, 2004, pp. 16–17). Such an understated approach is compatible with the overly popularized Japanese-inspired notion of 'continuous improvement' (a mis-representation of the Japanese term 'kaizen' which actually means continuous *self-criticism*). In effect kaizen is not so much a manufacturing technique as it is an entire unconsciously acquired philosophical outlook that entails the relentless emptying of thought and the 'perfecting of action' (Chia, 2003) *for its own sake* through sustained, incremental efforts at self-cultivation. Kaizen is more associated with *phronesis* and *praxis* (self-cultivation through virtuous actions) than with *techné* and *poiesis* (instrumental, output-oriented action) (Dunne, 1993, pp. 261–274). It is about the relentless cultivation of an ability to see clearly and in a pristine way; to develop an 'innocence of the eye' which is able to see things as they are without prejudice, as the English art critic and social reformer Ruskin (1927, Vol. XV, p. 27) puts it well. Such an aspiration underpins the cultivation of aesthetic awareness and coincidentally much of the Oriental outlook.

Konusuke Matsushita, arguably Japan's greatest industrialist has repeatedly in his 'management philosophy' the importance of managers at all levels cultivating what he calls a *sunao* mind. *Sunao* is a Japanese term that denotes meekness, tractability, an open-hearted innocence and genuine sincerity. It is an 'untrapped mind' able to 'look at things as they are at that moment' without bias or preconception (Matsushita, 1978/1986, p. 63) and to then adapt effectively to the ever-changing circumstances it finds itself in. Matsushita insists that at Matsushita Electric it is a regular management policy and expectation for managers to assiduously cultivate this *sunao* mind in the 'conviction that it enables us to perceive the real state of all things in society' (Matsushita, 1994/2002, p. 45) thereby enabling wise decisions and actions to be made in the conduct of human affairs. Such an existential outlook involving *kaizen* and the *sunao* mind is not primarily intended for utilitarian purposes but are 'meant to train the mind ... to bring it into contact with the ultimate reality' (Suzuki, in Herrigel, 1953/1985, p. 5). This is what drives the Japanese penchant for attention to small details from the meticulous care in the presentation

of Japanese cuisine (sushi, sashimi, etc.) to the perfecting of the 'art of archery' (Herrigel, 1953/1985), to their famed ikebana flower arrangements, to the cultivation of 'bonsai' (mini) trees etc. It is this cultural predisposition for perfecting self through attention to fine details that led to the unintended consequence of the dominance of Japanese manufacturing in the 1980s. Ironically, however, it is this very same lack of painstaking attention to the financial management of their economy that has contributed towards the economic doldrums that Japan still finds itself in after more than a decade of stagnation.

Attending to the inconspicuous changes always already occurring within and without organizations is vital to the process of successfully managing strategic change. It is an approach that contains a built-in aversion to spectacular doings and the direct clashing of policies, priorities and conflicting wills. The emphasis is on achieving one's ends quietly and inconspicuously by skilfully harmonizing one's interventions in accordance with the internal momentum of the situation and then learning to 'go with the flow' of events. In this way, unlike spectacular action which is always intrusive, unidirectional and one-off, 'letting happen' is characterized by an infinitude of minute and oblique *insertions* effortlessly made along the 'grain' of organizational situations so to speak, much like Chuan Tzu's 'good cook' cutting up oxen effortlessly and without damaging his knife. Outstanding change accomplishments are not to be attributed to the spectacular, singular stroke of significant individuals, but to the cumulative effect of a multiplicity of small cuts that gradually effects the transformations witnessed. The efficacy of such an elliptical and oblique approach to change is all the greater the more discreet and unnoticed it is. Ultimately, it is to recognize that the contributions of ordinary and oftentimes nameless individuals can unexpectedly produce extraordinary outcomes. Ho Kwon Ping, a former director of Singapore International Airlines (SIA) which has remained a leader in the aviation industry for the best part of 40 years, commented in a recent article that when he was a director of SIA, 'a fellow director once remarked that *the airline was an extraordinary company run by very ordinary people*' (Ho, 2009, p. 29, my emphasis). Despite trying times Singapore Airlines continues to excel after 40 years in a highly competitive airline business and the reason for this lies in its unshakable belief that the extraordinary emanates from the ordinary but only if it is *allowed* to happen.

Acknowledgments

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