

On chaos, savage uncertainty and new pathways

To the members of the *New Pathways for the Arts* program in Houston

October 2017

There's probably little solace to be had from words, when the water recedes to reveal the true extent of the losses, and little patience, I can imagine, for words that come from elsewhere – even when filled with loving-kindness. Knowing, however, that words may give form for us to some of the imagining we now need to do, I'll risk some writing that comes from the collision between the floods and the work we've been involved in together in *New Pathways for the Arts*. For now, is a time for new pathways, if ever indeed.

At a time when the conditions may make you despair of ever restoring the lives you had, reflecting for a moment on the Cynefin framework, one of the pillars of our work together, can help us find a way forward. Cynefin, you'll recall, is a way to make sense of different conditions in which we have to make decisions – about our own lives and about our organizations – and respond in ways that are likely to be most effective going forward.

Facing conditions that are stable and predictable, it's obvious to us that we can respond with a known best practice that will reliably solve the problem. When the challenge is complicated, we can bring in experts to tune up the way we do things; when it's persistent and complex, we need to depart from past practice, even if that's hard to do, in order to uncover genuinely new pathways; and when we face chaotic challenges, we have to accept radical change, nothing like what we've known, in order to get through.

Many things that happen in life contain elements of all four of these conditions – and frequently the elements appear in a kind of sequence. We try the obvious best practices; if that doesn't work, we go on to calling in experts. If the challenge persists, we have to start questioning our assumptions to reveal more adaptive approaches – sometimes pushing ourselves into the condition of chaos to radically loosen things up. At other times, these four aspects of a major challenge appear in the reverse order. And so it is in Houston right now.

Chaos, the framework indicates, is a specific condition – not a choice, for sure, but one of four different states we will, over time, find ourselves and our organizations in. Chaotic conditions are ones in which all normal constraints are removed and predictable things we can usually depend on are suddenly not working. There seems to be no relationship between cause and effect. All we can do is act quickly to triage the situation, carry out an immediate rescue to the best of everyone's ability, no matter what comes next. The floods have proven chaotic for millions of people, and few organizations in the arts have been in any way exempt.

There is a fierce urgency to responding to chaos, a desire for quick action, even if and when the immediate trauma has subsided. Food and clean water, shelter, medical help, are all still needed on a vast scale and rebuilding lives and businesses depends in part on resources being made available rapidly. People get angry if their needs are blocked by seemingly faceless bureaucracies, tensions run high, and many deeds become heroic. What Cynefin helps us understand is what may happen next, as some semblance of order returns.

There is both an opportunity and a trap in dealing heroically with chaotic conditions. After that experience, we emerge exhausted, sometimes a bit triumphant, and we are finally able to celebrate the return of some kind of normal, perhaps even shot through with new relationships, friendships, an instinct now for mutual aid. We are determined to restore. And we dig in for the long slog of clean-up.

The trap is for us to let ourselves lapse into dealing only with the complicated challenges that have continued to be there while we've been fending off the chasm: to go back to every possible semblance of business-as-usual and revert to tuning up those old ways so as to re-introduce a sense of stability. To some extent, of course, this is reasonable, understandable, and may be humanly necessary for a while.

But the opportunity you may have now is to use the savage disturbance of your assumptions, the glimpse of unfettered disorder, as the stimulus to address the complex challenges that you have historically passed over, as too murky in definition and too perplexing to get your heads around, in favor of the complicated challenges that live within at least knowable contexts.

In other words, we run the danger of snapping back to vestiges of the known, when the new muscles we grew in dealing with the chaotic experience should embolden us to take on the strenuous – but less pressing – task of addressing those deep-seated, persistent challenges in response to which we need (again) to do something different. If we can grasp this opportunity, we will never be better placed to adapt and thrive, to maintain and capitalize on our new shape, our discoveries – to use this opportunity to become genuinely resilient.

A funder in Boston told me of falling into the trap. “When \$25 million in annual philanthropy suddenly left the city, all of us who remained as funders were plunged into chaos. Collectively and separately, we cajoled and persuaded, we altered course, we brought others in, and after a while we were able to say we’d largely repaired the sudden hole in resources. Captivated and wearied by our achievement, we went right back to a kind of old normal, treating the situation as if old policies and minor revisions would maximize our impact as they had before. It was a huge mistake. We totally missed the opportunity to reshape the landscape more fundamentally in a sustainable way – and now we have a patchwork of funding support that’s again out of sync with our communities’ needs.....”

The philosopher A. N. Whitehead understood this: To make things anew, “order is not sufficient,” he wrote. “What is needed is something much more complex. It is *order entering upon novelty*, so that the massiveness of order does not degenerate into mere repetition.”

Repeating the past in circumstances of massive disruption would be comforting but is likely to be only a short-term palliative. If we can decisively cross the threshold of novelty, to discover a new way of being, and not be seduced by the call for restoration of order, then abundance, not scarcity, awaits us.



Richard Evans