

Spirit at Work

Jean Houston on spirit in organizations today



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Hamson... Instead of saying reinvigorating or rejuvenating, people are talking about respriting or creating something anew out of chaos. Why do you think this is coming up so often and why now?

Houston... In your letter to me you write about how all of these new processes which have come along to help organizations are like nailing jelly to the wall. You have the vision retreats, outward bound, Hoshin planning and so many other things and nothing seems to stick. Well one of the things that sticks is spirit. Spirit refers, doesn't it, to deeper levels of human resources. People have been re-engineered and reinvigorated by more facile, *here-today-gone-tomorrow* kinds of energies. Spirit is something that is forever. They are talking about tapping into resources that will have a sustaining capacity.

You give a very interesting definition where you talk about how there is a struggle between the biological drive of the species of survival and the mental/spiritual/soul-drive that wants to explore new ways of expressing itself. It's an excellent kind of analogy. The fact is that it may be that spiritual sourcing seems to activate all centers of our being: physical, mental, psychological, spiritual and creative. We need some kind of really primal substance — source sustenance that speaks to the metabolism of the galaxy as well as to ourselves.

Hamson... *So you don't think people need a little list of how to's to get there.*

Houston... Well, you see, everything works. As I've been going through the last ten or twelve issues of your journal filled with marvelous ideas. You really can't fault them and they all work for awhile.

Everything works, that is the secret. I think that is the reason for the proliferation of so many organizational development firms. (What is it, fifteen or sixteen hundred now?) Everybody can have an agenda that will work. But unless it is based on a much more primary source of being, it doesn't stick

The reason that that book some years ago on cultures and corporations spoke so richly and deeply to so many people was because it was telling the great truth. That corporations have their own corporate spirit and their own culture and even their own lithography so they were getting closer to the truth of the culture. Now what would happen if someone comes along who is a sustaining spirit evocateur?

One or all lead?

Hamson... Here is where I have a problem. We keep looking and we want someone to come riding up on a white horse or come to us in sandals or find an old book and give us some prophecy to somehow save us. But what is evolving today is knowledge that whatever is done will have to be done together, not personalized or due to some charismatic figurehead or leader.

Houston... But then you have to get over one of the biggest problems of the human condition which is sloth and entropy. The nature of sloth and entropy suggests that you can change everything but it does not make any difference, it is all going to go back to a kind of homeostasis.

That is why people have always looked throughout time and history for the man on the horse or the world historical being or the person who for some reason is activated out of enteleky. They will come along and they can have tremendous effects on the organization. Hagel once wrote “but when they go away it all falls apart” because of this old entropy and sloth factor.

What is a way through this? We talk about process, we talk about quality and participation. Hagel speaks about world historical individuals, those people who because of their particular passion correspond to the passion of the turning of the time — they are the entrepreneurs of the change. Hagel always saw the world historical *zeitgeist* as moving in individuals.

I think what is going to happen is that, in a sense, the world historical individual is going to become the world historical people in general. This means that there has to be almost a kind of passionate commitment to what is happening in this whole system transition so that people are energized by the historical moment and not just by the unique individual who still bears the intellect. I mean that's what I'm seeing.

Now what does this take? Everybody needs to be trained to be a master of this high game. And the stakes are very high, we are playing for mortal stakes. The high game is one in which we are all responsible and response-able.

As I read so many of these agendas about service to the customer, you know all the different kinds of agendas... they are not inspiring enough. They are not inspiring enough because people are caught in an extraordinary vortex of historical change. So, of course we are being respirationed.

Of course we speak to respiration because we are speaking about this extraordinary rise of a whole new complex variables in history where we are moving from a *Type One high level civilization* where we are responsible for evolutionary and biological governance to a few hundred months down the line we are going to be a *Type Two high level civilization* where we become responsible for the solar system, then some long way down the line *Type Three* where we join the galactic system and begin to create planets.

We are in a galactic jump-time in human history... This requires that we have access to levels of ourselves that before we used to objectify and give to others to be *future priests* or to politicians or to experts and we are at that strange point where you know it is very scary. Now a lot of people are following the fundamentalists in corporate management as well as in systems that we normally associate with fundamentalism.

Hamson... A lot of people are bothered by the appeal and apparent growing strength of fundamentalism in its many forms. I see it as a positive sign that fundamental positive change is at hand.

Houston... That is right. But its also the sunset effect. Things get brighter before they go down and we have a massive sunset effect happening around the world. But is also as you are saying this enormous change is at hand and so the word *respirationed* is really essentially a message from the future.

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You know that these are the times and we are the people... the biggest quickening in history. But its not a simple thing. This spirit-quicken- ing is in conjunction with a profound sense of historical change, that this is the big open moment plus realizing that your corporate decisions are also part of a much larger whole system change which is going to effect you in you personal beingness as well as your family. It is the most-stupendous change in history. But to just think of it as your little local spiriting of your corporation is a very small piece of that pie. I don't know If I'm making any sense to you.

Hamson... Well yes. You mean the call is one that everyone is...

Houston... I find it global.

Hamson... ...hearing in one sense or another and maybe that is why it is even scarier that per- haps almost everyone has realized we really don't have any choice about whether we are going to change or not

Houston... No we don't have choice.

Hamson... How are we going to do it? I contin- ue to see people trying to *nail jelly to the wall* because they try to find some formula to do it for them and that doesn't work and they have to fully commit.

Houston... You know that interesting phrase about jelly to a wall reminded me of earlier stages of evolution. When you have these great protoplasmic blobs going on for mil- lions of years and sort of not getting any- where and making a jelly for the cosmic wall and finally they figured out a way to join with other blobs and before you knew it you had rapid acceleration of evolution. I think talking about jelly to the wall is an interesting metaphor because what is in that jelly? Protein, synopsis, ideas, extraordinary caches of information.

And the problem is it is trying to nail itself to the wall. And it may be something is really much more profound that is trying to happen which is a whole new series of which just like an evolution the great globules are trying to

reach out to each other in a whole new sys- temic ways. It is not unlike an organism that was in the forest is like a slug and it does not look like anything and suddenly it gets togeth- er and it is this extra ordinarily complex organism. And I think that maybe some of the patterns of evolution are requiring that as long as individuals try to think of themselves uniquely... trying to make the change less is going to happen because we are about to shift into an entirely new systemic under- standing of the way things work.

Hamson... I really like the term quickening... it makes more sense than respiriting. Individuals in organizations are trying to find in respiriting that this X, this is the problem and this Y is the solu- tion. They are not going to find it in a set of pro- gram — are they?

Houston... The problem is not that the pro- grams don't work but they are secondary to the process. But the programs can be effec- tive.

Hamson... A couple of years ago you were talking about *remythologising*.

Houston... Well that means finding a larger story rather than mythologizing. Look at the larger story... everything has a story and a myth is something that never was but has always happened. Too often we get caught in a limited or diminished version of the story, be it our own story or the story of the insti- tution we are a part of.

Stories have sort of natural processes and breakthroughs. My old friend Joseph Campbell who I just saw on PBS is so popular because the eternal parities transcend any particular local historical situation.

So when we talk about the hero's journey there is a call and there is a refusal of the call and there is a gaining of allies on either side to get the call. And then there is a crossing of the thresh- hold between local reality in to a realm of amplified possibilities. You have to pass the threshold guardian who is generally the supreme bureaucrat you know you have to fool them and then you are on your own. And there is an enormous road of challenge in front of you.

And you picked up all these kinds of techniques and then there is a challenge, you get to the great dream, suddenly you have the revelation, you have a sense of meaning or communing with a much larger idea and vision. You get the dream and you come back making magical changes and then you become the master of two worlds.

Hamson... All these organizations in one way or another have been living this story the last 15 years. and at this point don't they all know they all have the same results?

Houston... The beginning is larger than what they think it is. In all the stories...

Hamson... Recognizing it is the problem...

Houston... We were afraid of the feeling, the response that we get because the call. We have been conditioned all of our lives: habit patterns, dreams. And then we hear ourselves saying, "I can really be all this." Then we say "My God! I can really be all this." And so we have sort of these great rising from the depths and say "YES, YES, YES" and then you say "WAIT! I don't think so." It would be too much spirit. It would mean living in a sustained state of postulating.

Hamson... It's not a whole lot different than things you've been saying for 10 years. Working people given a little bit of time-space to think about remaking work and a little bit of training and direction can do it. You don't need any fancy way to go about it. The idea that perhaps democracy — not a political philosophy but a democratic workplace — is frightening, because "I have to give up all my power so that our organization can..."

Houston... Part of the problem is that empowerment is not simply telling people to be what they can be. Its also distributing power. It not just saying "I am giving you a reward system." That's assuming I am the power and I am rewarding you. That is very inconsistent. The real implications of empowerment are so very adequate. Because it means not just calling it power. Calling up the potential that is what it is really all about.

And that means giving them something to do with their potential which means they have power. It is about potentiating rather than having power.

Hamson... You are talking about change at depth. Not so easy. How would you begin?

Houston... What has to happen is every organization has to part and partial to something that we could call "trade school for social artisans".

Hamson... I like that phrase.

Houston... You understand what I'm saying. There are simply too many changes to think that you can rely on your Harvard MBA or what you did and did not have and this means multiple modules that go on continuously in both physical changes cause you're not going to hold an idea but you are also extending yourself physically and neurologically. Being kept aware of how to make change happen, how to make it democratic, how to both empower and be empowered. All of these things and that's what it is. Any organization becomes a teaching, learning organization.

It becomes a trade school for social artists because you know what your going to do in your corporate world is also going to change the world around you.

Hamson... The pretense of the corporate world being separate from the rest of the world begins falling away?

Houston... We all have leaky margins. We are all organism environments. We are symbiotic states and that's something else that's part of the understanding of the place in history. That we are no longer incapsulated bags of skin. Dragging around dreary little corporate egos. We are organism environment. ♦