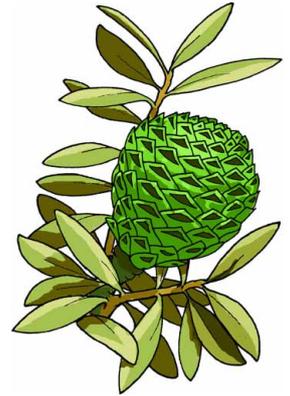


THE BUSINESS OF COMPLEXITY



“ ‘Maybe’ has always been the best odds the world has offered to those who set out to alter its course. It is not a cautious word. It is a defiant claim of possibility in the face of a status quo we are unwilling to accept.”
— Eric Young, from “Getting to Maybe”

One of the main reasons why our toughest social and environmental problems are so hard to solve is because no-one is really in charge of them. Our most difficult challenges do not exist beneath any effective command and control structure. Our communities are not run like the Army, and there’s no government department or corporate CEO at the helm.

Yet we may be making a big mistake by wishing there was someone actually in charge. This is because our toughest social challenges are all a part of a messy woven living system, and the way social systems grow and change and hold on to their dysfunctions — or break through into becoming something else — is often a real mystery. It’s no wonder that many people would prefer that someone was actually running the show.

It’s *complex*. And the best of our social entrepreneurs are people who seem to thrive amidst this mess. But the entrepreneur is not necessarily looking to be in charge — they are looking to be *in change*. They understand that if they are in the business of making fundamental systemic change, then they are also in the business of dealing with *complexity*.

- Many New Zealand social entrepreneurs and community activists have developed strong learning links with their colleagues in Canada. Throughout the 2000s, there has been a significant two-way exchange between our two countries — an exchange which has been

fostered by the Tindall Foundation, Philanthropy New Zealand, and the *Inspiring Communities* network. Many entrepreneurs and activists have attended courses and workshops at the Tamarack Institute, based near Toronto. These courses focus on poverty reduction, community building, how to inspire collaboration, and how to generate and capture knowledge that is based on what works best in practice. Over a dozen cities throughout Canada have been active in Tamarack's *Vibrant Communities* initiative, in which they are learning how to implement collaboration techniques and strategies to reduce poverty.

The Tamarack courses have represented a significant re-visioning of community development principles for the current generation. This re-visioning has placed a special importance on the understanding the relevance of “complexity” theories to the social sector.

The Canadian academic Brenda Zimmerman has been a regular contributor to the Tamarack courses, and she points out some useful distinctions that exist between *simple*, *complicated* and *complex* problems.



Zimmerman's example of a *simple* problem is “baking a cake”. If you follow the recipe, measure things properly, and get the oven right ... then you can be pretty sure that you will successfully bake the cake. The process here is *known*.

A *complicated* problem is much more involved. Her example is of “sending a rocket to the moon”. Here, there are many recipes or formulas needed to make things happen. There are high levels of expertise and training involved in many separate tasks that need to be well managed towards the overall goal. The process here is *knowable*, and there is a high degree of certainty that you will sort things out.



But a *complex* problem requires something else — something that is not so easily managed. Complex problems are often disorderly and organic and usually out of your own direct control. The example given by Zimmerman is “raising a child”. As we all know, every child is unique — the way you raise one child might give you some experience, but it is no guarantee of success when it comes to raising your next child.

When addressing a complex problem, skill and expertise are important but not sufficient. It is the quality of your relationships that are the key. The process here might even be *unknowable* before you start — but isn't a reason *not* to get on with it.

“Complexity” theories used to be a fairly esoteric academic field found in the world of science and biology. But the insights from these theories have found their way into the world of social entrepreneurship and community activism and in doing so, they have provided us with a whole new set of metaphors with which to view our work. The old “machine” metaphors that come from physics are giving way to “living systems” metaphors that come from biology. It is a re-framing that is proving to be a more useful way to look at our world because “living systems” are much more like the reality we see in our families and neighbourhoods.

- *Getting to Maybe* is probably one of the most useful books written on social innovation in recent years. The release of this book in 2006 coincided with the establishment of the Social Entrepreneur Fellowship, and as soon as we could get copies to New Zealand, we gave

one to each of the fellowship members. It was quickly read and embraced by many networks of our friends and colleagues.

When I first came across this book, I was surprised to find it had been written by three leading Canadian academics, and not by a group of practicing social entrepreneurs. The academics had done an excellent job of taking the creative stories of local and international social innovators and weaving them into “a hero’s journey” that awakens wisdom and pragmatism.

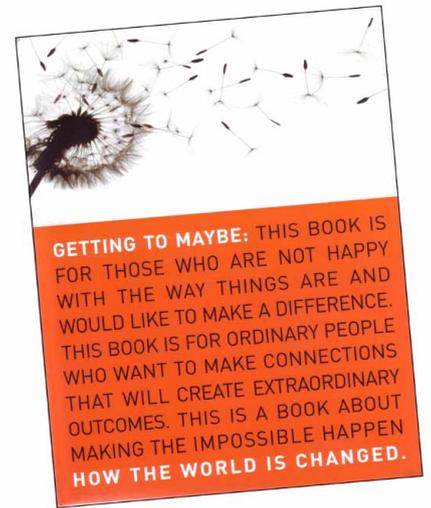
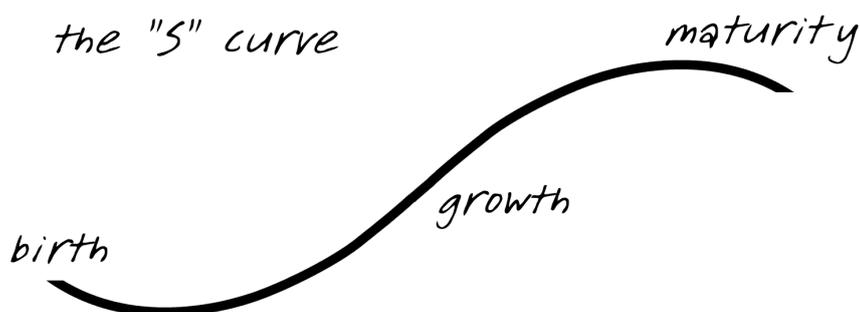
So many of the leadership and innovation books of recent years have used examples from the corporate and business management world, and highlighted these stories to illustrate their theories of change. Yet here, the *Getting to Maybe* authors were reaching deeply into the world of community and social action, and revealing a not-so-familiar narrative of the reality and experience of leaders for social change.

The case studies include widely recognized stories such as Bob Geldof of Band Aid and Live Aid, and Mohammad Yunus (the founder of the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh). The less well-known stories include Brazil’s successful fight against AIDS/HIV, Mary Gordon’s Roots of Empathy programme to eliminate bullying in schools, and Al Etmanski and Vickie Cammack’s work with the PLAN Institute for Caring Citizenship.

Getting to Maybe shows how the innovations of these entrepreneurs are based most simply on who they are, who they know and what they can do well. It shows how these leaders build reflective practices into their lives which bring perspective and balance and to their activities. The book shows how they have learned how to stay on a creative journey where there is no real map and no definite destination, and how they have embraced the paradox that their failures can often open the way to unexpected successes. It also gives some pragmatic advice to community trustees and leaders of philanthropic foundations who want to use these insights in fostering social innovation within their own programmes and activities.

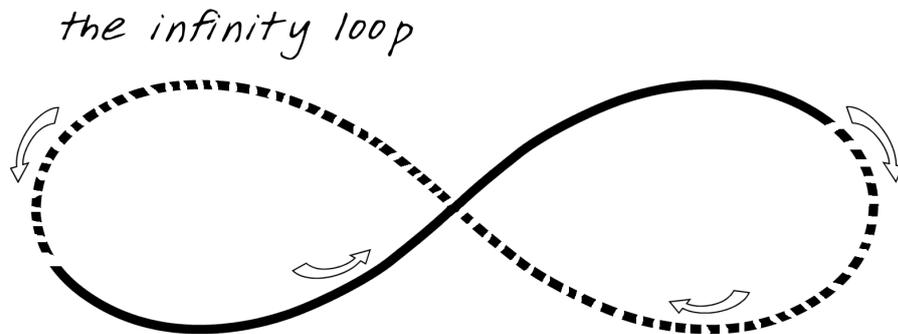
- The concept of *the eco-cycle* is found in *Getting to Maybe* and is often also taught at Tamarack Institute workshops. This concept is based on the natural life-cycle of ecosystems, and it has also become a useful metaphor for looking at how systemic change happens on major social issues. It helps to put some complex and very messy situations into perspective.

The classic “S” growth curve, taught in business schools, describes the birth, growth and maturity of a business or enterprise:

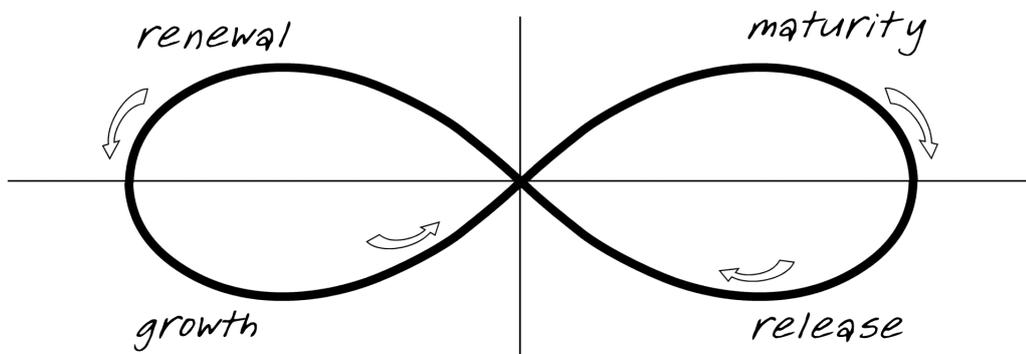


But this standard “S” growth curve misses out important parts of the true life-cycle of living systems. It misses out the stages of both death and conception ... and in doing so, it avoids talking about the very natural stages of release and renewal.

Let’s describe this classic “S” curve as the “forward loop” — because there is also a “backward loop”, the one we don’t as usually talk about.



The eco-cycle is depicted as an infinity loop — a figure “8” on its side where there is no real beginning or end. The developmental stages are all connected to one another. The growth and maturity of the forward loop are balanced by the release and renewal of the backward loop that are important stages in living systems.



A simple example for this life-cycle can be found in a forest ecosystem:

Small seedlings start to grow in an open patch in a forest clearing. Over time, this open space becomes crowded as more and more mature trees reach for the sky. It might stay this way for a very long time — until something comes along like a forest fire. It all looks pretty destructive, but the system is still alive. The burning of trees releases important nutrients into the soil. The fire creates an open space which is rich with potential. Seeds awaken (some of which may have even needed a fire to spark themselves into life) ... and the whole cycle continues again.

When we look at the eco-cycle metaphor, we can see that there is a similar life-cycle going on as we create human organisations and the institutions that seek to solve problems. But while we talk a lot in our mainstream culture about the forward loop of the birth, development and maturity of our organisations ... we don't so easily talk about the backward loop of the destruction, or of the incubation of new possibilities. It's the scary, disruptive and sometimes mysterious part of the journey. It's all about letting go and releasing organisational and cultural resources, and paying attention to what is emerging.

When a significant social problem is stuck and resistant to change, then it is usually also on the brink of tipping into this backward loop of destruction. But this can also be a *creative* destruction — because it is at this part of the cycle that the resources are unlocked for the next stage. These assets represent an as-yet untapped fertility ... and it is here that the seeds of “what's next” start to unfold.

It is in this backward loop of “creative destruction” that social innovators and entrepreneurs really come into their own. They are constantly straddling the tensions between disruptiveness and generativity. They are constantly looking for the possibilities waiting to be unleashed. And the key to being in this backward loop is to be sufficiently at peace with change so you can still notice the moments when these opportunities emerge.

- But all this talk of opportunity and possibility doesn't mean that social entrepreneurs are universally welcomed and celebrated for their role in “creative destruction”. The journey of the eco-cycle can be a very bruising experience for innovators.

The philosopher Schopenhauer once described another example of life-cycle that applies to the growth of new ideas and innovations in our culture. He says the innovations go through three separate stages:

Firstly, the new ideas are *ridiculed*.

Secondly ... they are *violently opposed*.

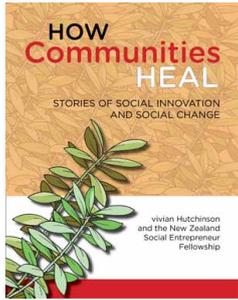
And finally, they are *treated as self-evident*.

Most social entrepreneurs tell me they recognise this story-line — they have lived it, and their projects have suffered it. They carry the bruises and scars that come with those first two stages of ridicule and violent opposition, and they often also bear the resentments that come when everyone else claims ownership of the innovation — when the need for it has finally become self-evident.

Perhaps we can see it's a natural thing for our culture to struggle against change and fight against the new. There is some profound and brutal truth at work here: that the innovations need to push against something before they can take their rightful place within the overall social eco-system. Perhaps it is even healthy to have this stress and tension going on — it's also part of the process of “creative destruction”.

In this context, the task for the social entrepreneur is to establish a permeable wall of common sense between the passionate, progressive *new* ... and the resistance of the *status quo*.

When the social entrepreneur is *in change*, the ideas only get better as they make their way through this wall of common sense.



Notes and Links

- This article by Vivian Hutchinson is part of the [HOW COMMUNITIES HEAL project](#) — stories of social innovation and social change featuring members of the New Zealand Social Entrepreneur Fellowship. It is available online at tinyurl.com/hchcomplexity
- *Getting to Maybe ...* book by Frances Westley, Brenda Zimmerman and Michael Quinn Patton (pub 2006 Random House Canada) is available at <http://astore.amazon.com/nzsef-20/detail/O67931444X>. In 2008, *Getting to Maybe's* lead author, Frances Westley, visited New Zealand and gave a series of workshops which were attended by many members of the NZSEF Fellowship.
- *Eric Young quote ...* is from his foreword to the book *Getting to Maybe*. Young has been a thought leader in the field of social marketing, and the founder and President of E.Y.E. The Social Projects Studio.
- *no-one in charge ...* see also “Co-operation, Collaboration and Co-ordination — the challenges of working together on unemployment and poverty” by Vivian Hutchinson (1999) available at tinyurl.com/vivianccc99
- *tackling problems in a shared-power world ...* see “Leadership for the Common Good”, by John M. Bryson and Barbara C. Crosby (1992, updated 2005) available at astore.amazon.com/nzsef-20/detail/O78796753X
- *Inspiring Communities ...* this New Zealand network of community development initiatives has been established by Mary-Jane Rivers, and supported by the Tindall Foundation. For more information see www.inspiringcommunities.org.nz
- *Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement ...* Tamarack had been established by Paul Born with the support of the leading Canadian philanthropist Alan Broadbent (who was also one of the founding trustees of the New Zealand Social Entrepreneur Fellowship project). For more information see <http://tamarackcommunity.ca>.
- “Tackling Complex Community Issues Tour — notes from New Zealand Trip 2007” by Mark Cabaj of the Tamarack Institute, contains many links of his source material on community-led development. Download from tinyurl.com/3bvgpkt
- “Accelerating our Impact: Philanthropy, Innovation and Social Change” by Katharine A. Pearson, Project Director, Sustaining Social Innovation (pub The J.W.McConnell Family Foundation, November 2006) available for download at tinyurl.com/2eng2mw
- *Complexity Theories ...* see interview with Brenda Zimmerman at the Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement <http://tamarackcommunity.ca/ssi8.html>.
- *The eco-cycle diagram ...* is derived from comparative studies into the dynamics of ecosystems. For more information see tinyurl.com/3qx6ttq
- *The eco-cycle ...* New Zealand designer Lisa Jankowska has taken further look at this in her paper “Design and Social Entrepreneurship — an Investigation of Potential Collaboration” (thesis for Otago University 2010)
- *Arthur Schopenhauer ...* German philosopher (1788-1860) see en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur_Schopenhauer
- More articles in this series, and further information on the HOW COMMUNITIES HEAL project can be found at www.nzsef.org.nz/howcommunitiesheal
- If you want to be notified of future releases of articles in this series, you can sign-up for our mailing list at tinyurl.com/HCHsign-up

- Comments and conversations on this project are encouraged on our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/howcommunitiesheal
- This project is on Twitter at [@HowCommHeal](https://twitter.com/HowCommHeal) using the tags [#HowCH](https://twitter.com/hashtag/HowCH) and [#socent](https://twitter.com/hashtag/socent)
- The online publication of the HOW COMMUNITIES HEAL project has been made possible by the Bishop's Action Foundation.
- Funding for this project has also come from several individual donors, the Jobs Research Trust, the Social Innovation Investment Group, and the Tindall Foundation.
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