

The Place of Imagination and Play in Organizational Transformation

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Introduction

I entered the Idea Factory, a San Francisco-based consulting group, to meet with Charles Warren, a conversation partner I had chosen for this research. The Idea Factory is located in a converted warehouse, which at the time of my visit was being reconfigured for an upcoming event. It was as if a theater set was being struck to make way for players to step onto the stage. Charles and I sat down on some couches in the middle of the room and began to talk about imagination and play as media for organizational transformation. Having barely begun, Charles says, “let’s stop talking and go play.”

He takes me over to a sandbox. Next to the sandbox is a shelving unit containing hundreds of small figurines, toys, and objects. Charles explains that we are each to create our conception of play in large organizations in the sandbox using items from the shelf. He will work in one half of the sandbox and I will work in the other half. We will spend about ten minutes and we will work in silence. Having visited the Idea Factory before, this process was familiar to me and I went to work on my sandbox scene.

I create two worlds. One consists of figures of people in specific roles: doctors, teachers, military men, etc. They are each facing inward and surrounded by a white picket fence. A large clock stands over the fenced-in people. The other world consists of much bigger objects. There are large dice, a treasure chest, a dragon, a peacock, and an eagle perched on top of stereo speakers. There is a globe with planes flying around it. Between the two worlds is a bridge. A naked baby is crossing the bridge and a snake is alongside the bridge. Just outside of the fenced-in world is a fairy on a stretcher and a clown face down in the sand. A hiker is standing on the edge of the sandbox and has made his way towards the world of big things.

Charles also creates two worlds. One consists of cars and other objects arranged in orderly lines and half buried in the sand. There are figures digging around the objects. The other world looks playful and fun. There is a merry-go-round. It is colorful and

represents movement. The figures appear to be moving about freely and happily. Between the two worlds is a jungle with snakes, dinosaurs and other scary creatures. Alongside the jungle are two boats. One boat carries a baby and the other an old man.

As we complete our scenes, Charles asks me to tell him the story of my world. I describe a place in which people are fenced-in by “shoulds.” The bridge is the pathway from the world of shoulds to the world of possibility. The baby represents the nakedness required to pass into the world of possibility. The snake represents shedding of skins, old ideas and stagnant ways of being. The fairy on the stretcher and the clown face down in the sand represent people who have tried to move into the world of possibility and been shot down by the fenced-in people. I note that in the world of possibility, everything is bigger, louder and more colorful. The hiker, who is successfully moving from the fenced-in world to the world of possibility, is doing so because he has found his own path, which is outside of the sandbox.

Charles describes his creation. There are the diggers, who are methodically and purposefully removing sand. This represents a search for clarity and order. The jungle evokes the place between those who are digging out from under and those who are in playland. The baby and the old man in the boats both have an ability to move back and forth between the two worlds. We notice the similarities in our scenes. Both show two distinct worlds, a liminal space in between (my bridge, his jungle) and attempts at movement between the two worlds.

Through imagination and play, Charles and I have created metaphors that allow us to explore organizational development in new ways. We have created a shared context for conversation and surfaced our assumptions, histories and horizons of meaning. In playing together, we have opened ourselves to new possibilities for action as organizational development practitioners.

This experience is one of many that lead me to believe that imagination and play are powerful media for both personal and organizational transformation. In the current business climate of globalization, increasing interconnectedness and interdependency, rapidly evolving technology and emerging relationships between organizations and communities, it is no longer sufficient to speak of organizational change. Change is inevitable and continuous. If I introduce a new software system into an organization, that is change. It may alter the way in which people do their jobs, but it carries little or no meaning.

Many organizational development practitioners would say that “change management” was in order to ensure that employees acclimated to the change created by the new software implementation. In this paradigm, change is something that can be anticipated and controlled to a predictable outcome. In fact there is a body of organizational development literature and models dedicated to managing change. In the introduction to his book, *Creating Paths of Change*, Will McWhinney (1997: 6) explains to readers,

[y]ou learn how to choose paths and strategies for change, preparing you for deciding which tool is appropriate for your situation. *The Tools of Change* provide step-by-step descriptions of problem solving processes, identifying where they fit into a path of change and the characteristics of people who might best utilize that tool. (italics in original)

McWhinney’s approach epitomizes the prescriptive orientation towards managing change. In such a view the practitioner identifies problems and applies a predetermined step-by-step methodology based on people fitting nicely into four-quadrant change models. I find this approach both demeaning and shortsighted. Organizations are not machines. They are self-organizing social spaces. I concede that some change may indeed be planned for in the case of mergers and acquisitions, or policy changes for example. And, that good, common-sense management practices can help employees understand the context of that change. However, as organizational

development practitioners, we must open ourselves to the possibility that we are not in control. Rather, we are participants in communities that are in a constant state of becoming.

The concept of transformation thus becomes the focus of my inquiry. Transformation insists upon a willingness to be open to new understanding, to examine past prejudices and history, and to acknowledge our unbreakable link to the other. The transformation of a community or organization is its movement towards itself. It is an unveiling and revealing of the possibility inherent in that community. It cannot be predicted. It cannot be managed. It cannot be controlled. This is not to say that transformation is without intentionality. Indeed, we are aiming towards something in the transformative process. It is the ethical aim and intention towards shared understanding and shared meaning in community that guide organizational transformation.

Thus, the place of organizational development practitioners shifts from managers of change to participants in transformation. This requires significant movement in the practitioner's thinking, orientation and language. Our challenge is not to change with the times, but to transform into the times we wish to create. Imagination and play open a space for such organizational transformation.

I explore this space through discussion of: 1) hermeneutic theory related to imagination and play, 2) insights from conversations with research participants; 3) aspects of individual and communal transformation; and 4) suggested avenues for application of theories of imagination and play to the realm of organizational transformation.

Theoretical Orientation

As I set out to write this thesis, I explored various writings on imagination and play. The business literature is profoundly disappointing. There are many books written on having fun at work, training games, brainstorming and creativity. In this literature, imagination and play are often viewed as activities. As such, they carry little meaning or possibility for significant shifts in ways of thinking and being. In addition, imagination and play are largely discussed in the context of business functions that have been sanctioned as places of innovation. For example, a reading of recent Harvard Business Review articles (Thomke 2001; Hargadon and Sutton 2000) found several cases of imagination and innovation in design and development groups, but little on imagination and play in functions like finance, legal, or administration.

As Jerome Bruner, Alison Jolly and Kathy Sylva (1976) demonstrate, in *Play – Its Role in Development and Evolution*, play has been studied by a variety of disciplines including childhood development, psychology, evolutionary biology, sociology, anthropology, and education. These traditions are more likely to view play as a medium for learning and development. However, these disciplines are often grounded in a positivist, empirical paradigm. As Herda (1999: 19) notes, the “fundamental problem with the logical positivist way of thinking is the attempt to reduce meaning to behavior.” The pervasive positivist view contends that one would have the capacity to observe and empirically measure the “outcomes” of play. As such, the person doing the playing is negated. Play and imagination become merely means to an end, i.e., a path to childhood development, or a necessary function of biology.

As early as 1975, Rollo May (1975: 125) shares this insight.

In our day of dedication to facts and hard-headed objectivity, we have disparaged imagination: it gets us away from ‘reality’; it taints our work with ‘subjectivity’; and worst of all, it is said to be unscientific. As a result, art and imagination are often taken as the ‘frosting’ to life rather than as the solid food...Throughout

Western history our dilemma has been whether imagination shall turn out to be artifice or the source of being.

Positivist thinking of imagination and play continues to persist in our views of social reality.

I choose to see imagination and play as the source of being, and therefore approach this study from a critical hermeneutic orientation. Whereas the positivist paradigm is concerned mainly with knowing, a hermeneutic orientation is an ontological one concerned with questions of being. When explored via the hermeneutic tradition, imagination and play become not a means but a medium. This medium allows for the exploration of meaning, identity and community. In the realm of being and becoming, imagination and play take on a power unattainable through a positivist lens.

In this work, I seek to liberate imagination and play from both the positivist paradigm and the linguistic conventions that have led to the “frosting” perspective. As Herda (1999: 69) writes, the “emancipatory interest is the guiding interest of critical social research.” Through a hermeneutic orientation to social inquiry, I hope to find a place for imagination and play in the discourse on organizational transformation.

Hermeneutics is the interpretation of events in language. In his landmark work, *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger (1996, original 1953) states that language is our house of Being. We do not possess language and employ it as a tool, rather language possesses us. We exist in language and through it come to understand ourselves and our world. This movement towards understanding and meaning is the telos of hermeneutic inquiry.

Humans are social linguistic creatures. Our Being, constituted in language, is revealed in conversation, the texts we create and in social action. Each of these can be interpreted to disclose meaning, and each carries with it a surplus of meaning (Ricoeur 1984) that can forever be interpreted in new ways. Such interpretation resides in the

history and tradition of the interpreter. Rather than attempting to bracket one's prejudices and preconceptions, pre-understanding becomes a vital to the interpretive process (Gadamer 2000). As David Linge (1976: xii) writes in his introduction to Gadamer's *Philosophical Hermeneutics*,

the hermeneutical has to do with bridging the gap between the familiar world in which we stand and the strange meaning that resists assimilation into the horizons of our world. It is vitally important to recognize that the hermeneutical phenomenon encompasses both the alien that we strive to understand and the familiar world that we already understand.

Social research in this tradition is thus concerned with the bridging of familiar and alien worlds: the world of the researcher and the world of research participants, the world of the present time and the world of possibility.

To build the bridge, I as the researcher must acknowledge and explore my point of departure, history, tradition and prejudices. As Herda (1999: 25) writes, these are "a necessary part of the act of interpretation, because we bring our background and being to the act." A neutral observer stance to research is thus not only impossible to achieve, but irresponsible. Herda (1999: 26) continues, saying that "the positivist research stance of neutrality shields researchers from critical elements of the research act – recognition of their constitutive role in the research process and acknowledgement of their moral obligation in experiencing anything." Thus, I approach this work with a full understanding of the ethical implications inherent in the language I choose and the world that I, with my research participants, co-create. This is the world in front of the text presented in this thesis, pregnant with possibilities for human action for readers.

Gadamer (2000) notes that each of us is but an extension of a tradition and history in which we are always already participants. That tradition for me includes a body of hermeneutic literature on the nature of imagination and play that will serve as the theoretical backdrop for my analysis of the transformative capabilities of each.

Review of Hermeneutic Literature

The hermeneutic literature on imagination and play revolves around the major contributions of Martin Heidegger, his student Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur and Richard Kearney. Each takes a different approach to the nature of imagination and play, yet there are common themes that emerge between each of these writers and those who have been influenced by them. Being, identity, meaning, social space, time and ethics continually surface in the hermeneutic discussion of imagination and play.

The Functions of Imagination

Over the course of his writings, Paul Ricoeur (1967; 1975; 1981; 1984; 1988; 1991; 1992) has developed a compelling portrait of the imagination. He notes that one of the first problems in the philosophy of imagination is the “bad reputation of the term *image*, after its misuse in the empiricist theory of knowledge” (Ricoeur 1991: 169). Imagination has been used to evoke things absent, envision fantasies, recollect images of the past and represent images of reality (Ricoeur 1991: 169-170). Yet these definitions fall short of conveying the ontological dimensions of imagination and its world-disclosing capability. Drawing upon Kant and Heidegger, Ricoeur (1991: 170-180) describes several functions of the imagination. While the literature uses the word “function” I choose the word “place.” Function connotes what something does, whereas place suggests a realm of exploration.

The *reproductive* imagination allows one to “evoke the absent thing” (Ricoeur 1991: 170). It is a representational place in which the image, based on memory or past experience, is recreated in the present. This is a mimetic process of redescribing that which already exists (Ricoeur 1991: 177). Ricoeur (1984: 54-76) provides a framework for this imagining in the form of mimesis, a three-fold dimension of the present. We

exist in the present time, yet the past and future are also always present with us. The world of tradition, history, and cultural artifacts can be seen as the past-present, the *pre-figured* world (mimesis₁) that we step into. Imagining the “kingdom of as if” we can *refigure* the world of the future-present (mimesis₃). This is the world that will be. Having an understanding of the pre-figured and re-figured worlds, we can *configure* a world (mimesis₂) in the present-present. Imagination takes us along this temporal journey.

Ricoeur (1991: 177) further notes that “beyond its mimetic function, imagination, even applied to action, has a projective function that is part of the very dynamism of acting.” The *productive* imagination brings forth that which did not exist previously, evoking new meaning. In so doing, elements are recombined and synthesized, opening up entirely different possibilities based on the new configuration.

The schematism has this power because the productive imagination fundamentally has a synthetic function. It connects understanding and intuition by engendering syntheses that are intellectual and intuitive at the same time (Ricoeur 1984: 68).

This productive imagination has a projective connotation, in which one imagines him or herself in worlds yet to be. In imagining oneself in new worlds, one might imagine him or herself as someone else. Thus, imagination inhabits an *empathetic* place as well, which Ricoeur (1967: 3) refers to as “sympathetic re-enactment in imagination.”

Each of these expressions of imagination, the reproductive, productive and empathetic is directly concerned with being. Ricoeur (1967: 278) states, “one lives only that which one imagines.” Imagination mediates between oppositions allowing for a synthesis in the lived world (Schaldenbrand 1979). Imagination recollects the past (reproductive) and projects the future (productive). It mediates between oneself and the other in the empathetic expression. Imagination dances between “extremes of arbitrariness and determinism” (Schaldenbrand 1979: 60). It finds the similar in the

dissimilar opening up new possibilities and configurations of the present. Yet, Ricoeur (1991) argues that this mediating character of imagination exists not in its capacity for mere image production, but in the creative refiguration of language. As Heidegger (1996) argues, our very being is constituted in language. Thus to imaginatively recombine and refigure language is to recreate our being-in-the-world. Ricoeur's (1991: 173) central theory contends that "imagining is above all restructuring of semantic fields."

Semantic Innovation and the Poetical Imagination

Ricoeur (1991) argues that the imagination exists first in language. "We see images only insofar as we first hear them" (Ricoeur 1991: 174). Creative use of language in poetry, metaphor and narrative has the power to disclose new worlds, and thereby open up new possibilities for human action. As Kearney (1998: 160) writes, "it is because there is poetical imagination that worlds dream being." In poetry, metaphor and narrative, new meaning emerges from the creative and unexpected use of language. In each case, the "semantic shock" resulting from the synthesis of dissimilar elements is the genesis of this new meaning (Kearney 1989: 4). As Heidegger (1971: 226) notes, "poetic images are imaginings in a distinctive sense: not mere fantasies and illusions but imaginings that are visible inclusions of the alien in the sight of the familiar."

This "grasping of resemblance" (Ricoeur 1973) between the dissimilar and similar is the creative power in metaphor. In his work on metaphor, Ricoeur distinguishes between trivial metaphors, which use language in culturally familiar ways, and novel metaphors, which through inventive recombination of language have the capacity to redescribe reality and open up new worlds. "The leg of a chair" for example, is a trivial metaphor in which no new meaning emerges. "Time is a beggar" however, carries with it a "surplus of meaning" allowing for a multitude of interpretations and possibilities

(Ricoeur 1973). As Lawlor (1992: 63) writes, “live metaphor is an event in meaning, not a mere instantiation of polysemy.” While words have multiple meanings, through semantic innovation and the placement of words in relationship to one another in context, the imagination produces something wholly new and without referent. This “kinship” between dissimilar ideas is the power of metaphor.

Here Ricoeur (1975: 212) borrows Wittgenstein’s concept of “seeing as.” By seeing x as y, one imagines the link between x and y and reconciles the apparent dissimilarity. “Seeing as” provides the connection between image and language. In the metaphor “time is a beggar” one sees time as a beggar, imagines time as a beggar, while still being able to hold the original meanings of “time” and “beggar” (Ricoeur 1975: 214). In so doing, multiple meanings emerge from the creative juxtaposition of words in the metaphor. Mary Schaldenbrand (1979: 75) notes, “‘seeing as’ builds new meaning on the ruins of accustomed reality.” Thus, imaginatively seeing one element of the metaphor as the other allows the reader to project him or herself into the world opened up by this relationship.

Imaginative variations in fiction and narrative have a similar world-disclosing capability. In the telling of a story, the narrator recollects a past and anticipates a future, engaging the imagination and playing with time. The act of emplotment, of stringing together disparate events into a coherent story line, is an act of creatively imagining connections and filling in gaps. Ricoeur (1984: 76) notes that “emplotment can be described as an act of judgment and of the productive imagination.” In the emplotment of one’s own story, imagination becomes linked to narrative identity. The narrator chooses what to include or exclude from the story, how to ascribe meaning to events, and what to creatively embellish. Thus, the narrator not only recounts the story, but creates a new world through imaginative telling of it.

Whether through poetry, metaphor or narrative, the poetic use of language opens new ways of being in the world. Richard Kearney (1989: 6) writes,

[t]he metaphors, symbols or narratives produced by imagination all provide us with “imaginative variations” of the world, thereby offering us the freedom to conceive of the world in new ways and to undertake forms of action which might lead to its transformation. Semantic innovation can thus point towards social transformation.

The Social Imagination

In Ricoeur’s philosophy of the social imagination he explores the interplay between ideology and utopia. Ricoeur (1991: 181) writes, “the truth of our condition is that the analogical tie that makes every man my brother is accessible to us only through a certain number of *imaginative practices*, among them, *ideology* and *utopia* (italics in original).” Ideology consists of a group’s need to give itself a socially integrated meaning scheme. A culture imagines itself to be a certain way, creating an idealized version of itself. Utopia, on the other hand, is a critique of reality, imagining new ways of living and being in the world. Whereas ideology serves to integrate, utopia disintegrates or subverts the social order. Each has the potential to reveal possibilities for being in the world and each has the potential to descend into dysfunction. Ricoeur (1991: 187) writes,

We take possession of the creative power of the imagination only in a critical relation with these two figures of false consciousness. As though, in order to cure the folly of utopia, we had to call upon the “healthy” function of ideology, and as though the critique of ideologies could only be conducted by a consciousness capable of looking at itself from the perspective of “nowhere.”

Thus, the social imagination takes on the role of critical mediation in pursuit of ethical social relations.

Ricoeur (1984) explores a similar dynamic between the poles of tradition and innovation. Imagination allows for recollection and refiguring of the past, yet at the same time, it projects new and innovative possibilities (Kearney 1989: 19). Tradition and innovation are two sides of the same coin. One cannot imagine an inventive approach

without acknowledging the tradition being broken. One cannot name tradition as such without imagining diversions from the well-worn path. The back and forth between tradition and innovation is central to the cohesiveness of a community as a whole. Kearney (1998) expands on this relationship between tradition and innovation as related to the social imagination.

On the side of tradition, Kearney (1998: 228) introduces the testimonial imagination – “that is, the power to bear witness to ‘exemplary’ narratives legaced by our cultural memories and traditions.” We hear the voices of the other and imagine the world in which they lived. This testimonial imagination prevents us from forgetting the victims of history, and reminds us of our triumphs. Kearney (1998: 232) shows the receptive capacity of imagination in our hearing of others’ stories and bearing witness to our collective history. Yet Kearney (1998: 230) warns that the testimonial function of imagination must not fall to dogmatism. We must continue to enlist the projective capacity of imagination to disclose possibility. “Imagination also takes on a political role, that of envisaging the needs of others not immediately present to us, and of envisaging the most effective social means of meeting them” (Kearney 1998: 234). An ethically based social imagination relies then on continued social innovation as well as reverence for tradition.

The Ethical Imagination

Kearney (1988) continues his exploration of the social imagination extending his argument towards an ethical sense of imagination. He contents that the imagination faces a particular crisis in the post-modern era, in which the endless projection of images through mass media threatens to trivialize and conceal the power of imagination itself. Post-modernism, Kearney (1988; 1998) argues, is characterized by simulation and an enveloping patchwork of imagery, resulting in a loss of meaning of the images

themselves. To move toward an ethical sense of imagination, one must move through this “labyrinth” of imagery to find the face of the other. “We find it in the face which haunts imagination: the ethical demand to imagine otherwise” (Kearney 1988: 364). Here Kearney recalls Ricoeur’s (1992) concept of the “faceless other” to whom we are always responsible in our actions. “Behind and beyond the image a face resides: the face of the other who will never let imagination be” (Kearney 1988: 365).

This ethical call to the other certainly evokes the empathetic imagination. In our receptivity to the other we can imagine his or her plight and act with compassion. Yet the greater challenge is to imagine with the other, a just and ethical world which we both may inhabit. For Ricoeur (1992) the ultimate ethical act is seeing oneself as another. It is only in this relationship to the other that we can truly be free. Schaldenbrand (1979: 79) writes,

Ricoeur joins freedom, not simply to necessity understood, but to possibilities uncovered. And, insofar as uncovering possibilities occurs above all through the “as” of poetic seeing, he further implies the mediation of ethics by works of poetic imagining.

This freedom to uncover possibilities is closely connected to one’s power to act. In fact, Ricoeur (1991: 177) claims that, “without imagination there is no action.” Imagination provides the “luminous clearing” (Ricoeur 1991: 177) in which to consider possibilities, evaluate motives and make ethical judgments on the best course of action. It is in this liminal space between the “is” and the “ought” that we give ourselves the power to act by imagining what we could do (Ricoeur 1991: 178). Such imagining falls in the realm of the ethical imagination in that every action or possible action carries with it ethical implications and a responsibility to the other.

Kearney (1998: 366) cautions us however that,

[t]he imagination, no matter how ethical, needs to play. Indeed one might even say that it needs to play *because* it is ethical – to ensure it is ethical in a liberating way, in a way which animates and enlarges our response to the other rather than

cloistering us off in a dour moralism of resentment and recrimination. (*italics in original*)

While the imagination can never “take leave of the other” (Kearney 1998: 218) it must continuously search for the spirit of play. Imagination, Kearney (1988: 367) argues, “needs to be able to laugh with the other as well as to suffer.” In this laughter and play with the other, our imagined relationship is brought into the present time and space.

The Nature of Play

Hans-Georg Gadamer (2000) posits that play is an ontological event in which horizons of understanding are tested and explored. Play is a movement, a to-and-fro, with a spontaneity and rhythm (Gadamer 2000: 103). Like the play of light or waves, play is “the occurrence of the movement as such” (Gadamer 2000: 103). Play is not an act of the player, and is not something one does, but rather play itself becomes expressed in the person playing. At the same time the player represents him or herself in play, thereby exploring his or her being through the medium of play.

Gadamer (2000: 109) notes that while there are certain rules or structure to the game, play is not constituted by this structure but by the process that takes place “in between” the players. This in between space is the place of growth and exploration. There is a suspension of the real in order to encounter the possible. Gadamer (2000: 112) tells us that “in being presented in play, what *is* emerges. It produces and brings to light what is otherwise constantly hidden and withdrawn.” He continues, saying that the “being of all play is always self-realization, sheer fulfillment, *energeia* which has a telos within itself.”

Ricoeur (1981) picks up on this spirit of play in relationship to appropriation. In the reading of a text, there is “always a question of entering into an alien work, of divesting oneself of the earlier ‘me’ in order to receive, as in play, the self conferred by

the work itself” (Ricoeur 1981: 190). Identity is then up for questioning. In appropriating meaning from a text, the reader plays with his or her own identity and being in the world and finds new meaning. This can lead to a transformation of the self in play, a finding of oneself by losing oneself in the movement of play (Ricoeur 1991: 88). Ricoeur (1991: 88) states that “the metamorphosis of the world in play is also the playful metamorphosis of the ego.”

This metamorphosis Gadamer would term “transformation.” By presenting oneself in play, the player plays himself out (Gadamer 2000: 108). While play is always happening in the context of our relationships to others, the medium of play opens the player to exploration of himself. Gadamer (2000: 111) distinguishes between someone who acts a part or puts on a disguise from one who allows himself to become lost in play. The masquerader is in fact holding on to his concept of self, refusing its exploration, and protecting it from others. To enter into play, on the other hand, is to give over the self. Gadamer (2000: 112) claims that “play itself is a transformation of such a kind that the identity of the player does not continue to exist for anybody.” What is left is only what is “meant” by the play.

This losing of the self in play is not a negation, but rather the emergence of true being. Gadamer (2000: 111) states,

transformation means that something is suddenly and as a whole something else, that this other transformed thing that it has become its true being, in comparison with which its earlier being is nil.

Play is the medium of this transformation. Our true being becomes expressed in play and in relationship to other players. In this way, play and conversation are closely linked. In the back and forth movement of both conversation and play, being finds expression and new possibilities unfold.

Research Process

In the tradition of participatory hermeneutic inquiry, my research process for this work consisted of a series of research conversations. A conversation, as I communicated to potential research participants, is quite different from an interview or focus group. In conversation, the researcher and participants test and question their current horizon of understanding and are able to co-create new meaning through their mutual participation. An interview consists of the researcher attempting to attain a neutral stance towards the research “subject” and elicit information from that person in a detached and impersonal way. Conversation, on the other hand, is a collaborative process. No one is neutral because our histories, traditions, perspectives and experiences are being acknowledged and explored in the conversation itself. In this shared experience, what is created between the researcher and the participants becomes the research data.

Herda (1999: 131) tells us that

[p]lacing one’s prejudices, or prejudgments, at risk happens against a backdrop. There needs to be another person’s tradition, culture, or history that comes to the foreground in the presence of someone who, in turn, sees his own past and reflects on it. Two people in conversation,...provide a setting in which such learning can take place.

I am fortunate to have participated in seven such conversations. My conversation partners were: Stuart Brown, founder of the Institute for Play, Charles Warren of the Idea Factory, Bernie DeKoven of Deep Fun, Addie Johnson, a senior executive of Gap Inc., Stacey Yarnall of the Omega Group, George Romanko, a fellow student and organizational development practitioner at DHL, and Bryce Bawden and Bo McFarland, scholars of philosophy and life. Each participant comes from a different history and tradition, making for a rich and varied body of perspectives on the topic at hand. I am thankful for their participation and willingness to play with me in my exploration.

These conversations were recorded and transcribed, with the exception of the conversations with Stuart Brown and Stacey Yarnall (see Appendix I). Through the transcriptions our discourse becomes fixed in writing in the form of a text (Ricoeur 1981: 145). These texts became the focus of my analysis and the foundation of this writing. As Herda (1999: 127) notes, in the text of the transcription allows the speakers to distance themselves from their speech so that the “meaning of what is said surpasses the event of saying.” I distanced myself from and returned to these texts on multiple occasions, each time finding new meaning.

In addition to my research conversations, I draw upon 1) my analysis of *The Promise of Play*, a three-part video series produced by Stuart Brown, 2) my personal research journal, and 3) various writings on imagination and play. It is now my intention to find the greater narrative that reveals the relationships amongst these diverse perspectives and opens new possibilities for the practice of organizational development. I invite you, the reader, to join me and interpret this text so that together we may move toward the vision described by Herda (1999: 128):

The interpretation of the text is complete when the reading of it releases an event in our lives whereby we understand each other anew, and we learn how to address our social challenges in a different light, one that gives each of us a future with dignity.

Presentation of Data

Conversation is a movement back and forth between two people, who may eventually come to truly understand one another. My research participants and I did this dance – at times reaching new understanding, and at times, staying rooted in our histories and traditions. There were a few things that I noticed right away. First, some of my partners had a bit of difficulty with the idea that we would be having a conversation rather than an interview. They wanted to be sure that they were giving me all the information I needed, whereas I was interested in what we might co-create.

Second, I noticed that some of my partners focused primarily on past experiences and were less apt to explore with me what the future could be. This was clear in their focus on descriptions of play and playfulness and difficulty discussing imagination. These tendencies, to provide me information and ground that in examples of past experience, stem from a positivist paradigm under which many of us have been educated.

One of the initial challenges in speaking with my conversation partners was finding shared meaning and definitions of terms. Play was at times equated with fun and/or viewed as an activity, whereas I was interested in exploring play as a state of being. In addition, we sometimes struggled in distinguishing imagination from business practices such as “brainstorming” and “visioning.” Several of my conversation partners spoke in terms of pairings such as work and play, serious and playful, or real and imagined. This theme of definitions was so strong that at times it became the focus of the conversation itself. As my partner Addie Johnson notes, “the work may be defining it. Defining imagination and play...the newness, the richness comes in redefining.”

Although our initial perspectives may have been different, through conversation, my research participants and I were able to come to some shared understandings about imagination and play as transformative media. We explored relationships between work and play or real and imaginary, to find that they were not opposites, but complements. We were able to refigure play as more of a spirit than an activity. We were able to imagine what imagination could be. And, we were able to see how our varied backgrounds could provide a fertile space for cross-disciplinary approaches to organizational transformation to emerge.

The rich and diverse views of my conversation partners led to a reservoir of data that at first seemed disjointed. However, as I look at the conversations as a whole, common themes come forth for my analysis of imagination and play in organizations.

These are transformation of the self, transformation in community, and new frameworks for social action.

Data Analysis

For an organization to transform, individuals must be open to the possibility of self-transformation. This transformation of the self can only take place in the context of relationships to the other, thus communities within the organization also transform. The emergence of this individual and communal transformation allows for new frameworks of coordinated action extending the ripple of transformation throughout the organization as a whole. I am not suggesting that organizational transformation is a linear process progressing from individual to community to the whole of the organization. Rather, these are interdependent phenomena that together create the context for organizational transformation.

Transformation of the Self

Transformation of the self is a coming into being of the true self (Gadamer 2000). This transformation acknowledges and stems forth from one's history and tradition, is negotiated in playing with different aspects of the self, and appeals to one's "ownmost potentiality for being" (Heidegger 1996: 272). The concept of transformation suggests movement from one state of being towards another. Stuart Brown has studied play from sociological, psychological and biological perspectives. He notes that the absence of a play state is associated with a limited ability of the organism to adapt, i.e. to transform. In "playlessness" Stuart sees a corresponding "existential emptiness." To explore one's relationship to play, Stuart encourages those he works with to develop multi-generational play histories. Such play histories connect us to our predecessors, and reveal our traditions and assumptions about play.

Based on my conversation with Stuart, I began to chronicle my own play history. For me, play has been closely linked with learning. As a child, I was placed into a program for gifted students at my elementary school. Once a week, I went to a special classroom with a handful of other children and engaged in highly playful, exploratory learning. I recall a vivid memory of a project on architecture in which I created a structure out of giant tinker toys. My building stood about ten feet tall and became both a lesson in form and physics as well as a playhouse for the class. The freedom and possibility I experienced through learning in this way have forever changed me and continues to inform my history and tradition in relationship to play.

Our play histories become part of our overall journey of self-transformation. Stuart describes “the process of play as the development of who you are.” Moving from childhood into the adult world, social norms and expectations creep into our relationship with play and imagination. Bernie DeKoven notes that play has often been described as the role of a child or a childlike attribute. However, he says, “I think that play is a human attribute. Play comes not from the child part of our being, but from our very being itself. Adult is something that we are playing.” The playing of a role is both a hiding of the self and an exploration of the self.

This is particularly true as we enter the business world, and are expected to take on various roles in relationship to our job functions. We can play a role at work, and at the same time, work and play have been defined in opposition. Addie Johnson, a senior executive at Gap Inc. notes, “I think people are afraid to be that far out of the norm, to truly be creative and innovative. There is risk involved in being creative. I could come up with a wild idea or be creative and get rejected. And given the culture of a company, I’ve ruined my whole career.”

Social norms within many corporate environments discourage play and imagination, leading employees to close down that part of the self. Addie’s choice of the

words “creativity” and “innovation” in lieu of imagination and play may even reflect her adherence to norms of acceptable business language. Addie continues, “if you show up and get known for playing, you run the risk of getting known as not taking your work seriously.” Here, organizational roles and expectations can often become markers of individual identity. At Gap, Addie shares, “they had actually listed as a job category creative people and non-creative people. And I turned several flips in the hallway. They were talking about the people in New York as the only people who were creative.” Thus, the product development team in New York is the only group with organizational permission to be imaginative and playful in their work.

A similar theme comes through in my conversation with Charles Warren at the Idea Factory. Charles has defined himself as imaginative and playful while seeing others who had more financial or technical roles as being “repressed.” “I’ve always been about emergence and breaking the rules,” Charles tells me. “And, I thought the people on the other side were stupid. But you know what, they’re not. They are equally creative in their own way. As soon as I learned that, my life changed in a big way.” The false distinctions between imaginative and serious, or playful and smart have severely limited organizations’ capacity to engage the whole self of their members. Imagination and play are innate in our being. There is no on/off switch. Yet in the context of business, many of us have disconnected from our playful and imaginative selves out of fear. Fear that we may be exposed as uncommitted or unprofessional. Fear that our imaginations may evoke the unpopular or impractical idea.

These fears are not unfounded. There is risk in imagining and risk in play. We risk bringing forth new possibilities. We risk letting go of deeply held assumptions. Addie notes, “people are afraid, I believe, of imagination. Because imagination means that you can see the possibilities of pretty much anything.” Exploring all of these possibilities, especially in relationship to one’s own identity, can be quite frightening. Addie works

with senior executive teams in a leadership development program. Part of this program involves participants creating a personal leadership journey line that can often raise difficult and painful issues. Although the process is scary for many of these executives, Addie uses play to move through the fear and open up learning. “It was a verbal and silent agreement that we would play through this [the leadership journey line]. We were going to get through this by playing our way through it.” Thus play can be scary if we are concerned with how others may view us, and on the other hand we can “play through the fear” to reach a greater understanding of ourselves in relationship to others.

An excerpt from my conversation with Bryce Bawden takes this a step further.

Bryce: The ethical threat to Being that occupies Heidegger’s later work, he refers to as the danger of being, or the danger of the nothing, of nihilism. And he makes an interesting point – in the danger is the saving. In other words, without risk, we have no sense of salvation, of saving, of gaining by saving. So on that basis, I can think of a dangerous game being legitimate even...

Kristi: Well, is the dangerous game a temporary hurt for longer term saving?

Bryce: That’s what it would have to be. And again, that would show play as being transformative.

Heidegger (1977: 35) tells us “the closer we come to the danger, the more brightly do the ways into the saving power begin to shine and the more questioning we become.” As we play into the danger, the path to the saving is illuminated and we also become more curious in the form of questioning. To save is to “fetch something home to its essence, in order to bring the essence for the first time into its genuine appearing” (Heidegger 1977: 28). The saving is the revealing of the true essence. At the same time, as we continue to question, to imagine, to play, we will continue to move into the danger. So, imagination and play are dangerous in that they are open to all possibility, yet in that danger lies the saving of the true essence.

Part of the danger stems from a belief that we may become unrecognizable to ourselves if we are truly free to play and engage our imaginations. Yet transformation of

the self in play is not the same as destruction of the self. Paul Ricoeur (1992: 18) describes two elements of identity, the *idem* and the *ipse*. *Idem* refers to that which is the core of one's identity, or sameness that persists over time. *Idem* identity can also be seen as the "uninterrupted continuity" of the self (Ricoeur 1992: 117). "Thus, we say of an oak tree that it is the same from the acorn to the fully developed tree;...so, too we speak of a man or a woman" (Ricoeur 1992: 117). This is the essence of the self that is saved.

*Ips*e identity refers to the changeable elements of the self, or the diversity of selfhood. This is the part of the self that questions, that plays roles, that gathers and sheds new ways of being. Bernie DeKoven invites participants in his workshops to explore their identities in play. "You can use the play and game metaphor to develop a kind of playful relationship between yourself and your various aspects" between the sameness and difference within the self. In so doing, Bernie hopes that participants in his workshops will find ways in which various aspects of themselves can collaborate rather than competing. Imagining variations of the self and playing with the self can thus lead to an integrative transformation of the self and an emergence of the self's true essence.

This exploration of the self in play cannot exist in isolation from the other. One's self is transformed precisely because we are in relationship to the other. Ricoeur (1992) suggests that true understanding of the self comes in imagining "oneself as another" bringing forth the empathetic imagination and our care for the other in community.

Transformation in Community

Imagination and play provide a transformative space for communities as well as individuals. Heidegger (1996: 111-112) reminds us that we are forever in community in that "the world is always already the one that I share with the others. The world...is a

with-world.” That with-world of community is constituted in care for the other. In my conversation with Bryce Bawden and Bo McFarland, I ask, “how does a community play together?”

Bo: The beauty of play is, for it to be able to happen in a group, is for everyone to be open to the possibility that anyone can contribute something. And have a listening, I would almost call it a respect, a regard, almost a sacredness about people....

Kristi: Well, you’ve described, I think, Heidegger’s conception of care. He says that care is central to being. And that openness and receptivity is what care is about...

Bryce: I’d say a community plays together by knowing to take turns...you realize that you will be yielding your turn, and you will see how the other approaches the shared end.

This yielding of turns, listening and holding the other as sacred allows a community to imagine possible futures together. It is also the basis of deep dialogue in which participants in a community come to arrive at a shared sense of meaning.

David Bohm (1996: 6) likens dialogue to a “stream of meaning flowing among and through us and between us.” A true dialogue does not have a prescribed end point. Rather the conversation unfolds and evolves towards an undefined synthesis of participants’ life worlds. This is quite different from a discussion or negotiation in which participants compete with each other. “Dialogue is something more of a common participation, in which we are not playing a game against each other, but *with* each other” (Bohm 1996: 7).

In this spirit of play, participants are able to release themselves from constricting ideologies and assumptions, and begin to see the possibilities presented by others as the conversation unfolds. The result is a shared sense of meaning linking members of the group to one another (Bohm 1996: 6). This shared meaning has the capacity to transform a community by bringing into light what was previously hidden (Gadamer 2000: 112) and creating a platform for action.

Bohm (1996) likens the process of arriving at shared meaning to a laser beam. Single points of light are far less powerful than a stream of light focused in a common direction. Yet Heidegger (1971:13) warns us that we must not attempt to define where the laser beam is pointing. It will emerge as we hold each other in dialogue and imagine what is possible. An excerpt from Heidegger's conversation with a Japanese colleague illustrates this.

J: We Japanese do not think it strange if a dialogue leaves undefined what is really intended, or even restores it back to keeping of the undefinable.

I: That is part, I believe of every dialogue that has turned out well between thinking beings. As if of its own accord, it can take care that that undefinable something not only does not slip away, but displays its gathering force ever more luminously in the course of the dialogue (Heidegger 1971: 13).

The "gathering force" carries a community towards its undefined yet felt and imagined course of action. The community in dialogue becomes less concerned with explaining *what is*, and more concerned with a curiosity about *what could be*.

The movement back and forth in dialogue towards an undetermined end is an expression or mode of play. It is a place of testing of horizons of understanding, collaboration and connection. Dialogue builds the "mutual trust that is essential to social play" according to Stuart Brown. Thus dialogue can both be play in itself and create the space for play in community. Bernie DeKoven draws upon Mihaly Csikszentmihaly's work and calls this a "state of flow." Bernie continues, "being in flow together is a special state that I call confluence, or mutual empowerment...I think that's what people tend to want to do. They form play communities rather than games communities."

Bernie distinguishes a play community and a games community. A games community is about the game itself. For example, when a group of people gets together to play golf. The game becomes central and "decides" who is worthy of playing. A play community, on the other hand, is about the experience of play and the nature of the game is secondary. The players assess the value of the experience rather than the game

defining who is good enough to play. Because the play community is unconcerned with the rules of the game, it has the potential to continue to evolve and transform through the experience of play. Bernie extends this thought saying, “the work community needs to have a kind of function like the play community” where people are “in a state of collectively transforming the job.”

Such communities are self-organizing and emergent. They cannot be controlled nor externally created. These “communities of practice” as Etienne Wenger (1998) names them, organize around shared social practices, learning and meaning. Imagination is a “mode of belonging” in communities of practice (Wenger 1998: 174). Wenger (1998: 178) beautifully describes the place of imagination in the transformation of our communities.

Through imagination, we can locate ourselves in the world and in history, and include in our identities other meanings, other possibilities, other perspectives. It is through imagination that we recognize our own experience as reflecting broader patterns, connections and configurations. It is through imagination that we see our own practices as continuing histories that reach far into the past, and it is through imagination that we conceive of new developments, explore alternatives and envision possible futures. By bringing the exotic to our doorstep and carrying us into foreign lands, imagination can make us consider our own position with new eyes. By taking us into the past and carrying us into the future, it can recast the present and show it as holding unsuspected possibilities.

Imagination’s transformative power in relationship to time is clear here. In imagining a community is at once outside of time, in the sense that the present becomes suspended, and also presently linked to the past and future. Our predecessors, successors and contemporaries are always with us in community (Ricoeur 1988). The community can thus be transformed in the imaginative retelling of its past, the anticipation of its future, and its imagining and exploration in the context of present dialogue.

When a community imagines together, the utopian imagination is invoked, yet imagination can also take on a more sinister demeanor. Someone imagined the World

Trade Center terrorist attacks before they happened. Someone brought that image of death and suffering into the world. Bryce, Bo and I discuss the recent terrorist attacks on the United States in this light. Bryce has not seen any video images of the attacks and so has only his imagination to connect him to the community's loss and pain.

Bryce: My imagining it transforms me. And when people say, "it can't happen again" well, it can't happen identically, but it can happen again. I must imagine it happening again, but differently.

Kristi: When you say "must", what do you mean?

Bryce: The idea that if it has happened, then it can happen again. To me that's a must. In order to understand it having happened, I must imagine that it could happen again.

Kristi:...How I heard it was, ethically I must imagine this could happen again in order to be part of this human community in which it has happened.

Bryce:...Right. If I were simply to put it out of my mind I would be withdrawing from the community.

In community, our imagining ties us to one another. This is what Richard Kearney (1998: 218) speaks of when he says that imagination cannot "take leave of the other."

Communities transform as they play together in dialogue, imagine together the world they would inhabit, and attend to the ethical considerations evoked by such imagining. Imagining both locates and moves a community through time in its interdependency with those who have come before and those who will follow after. Play allows for exploration of the community's sense of meaning in the present time and creates the space for shared understanding among community members to emerge. With a greater sense of shared meaning, a view of what is possible, and an ethical understanding of the implications, the stage is set for communities to step into new frameworks for social action.

New Frameworks for Social Action

Heidegger (1971) speaks of the open and the light, Ricoeur (1991) of the luminous clearing, Gadamer (2000) of the in-between. These liminal spaces are the spaces of imagination and play. They are also the spaces in which new frameworks for social action emerge. In order to arrive at shared meaning and open up new possibilities for human action, there must be a place for the questioning of current horizons of understanding. It is a place of discovering what “is” and what “ought” to be, thus creating the context for social movement towards the “ought.” This movement is guided by our innate ethical know-how and our being-with each other in community.

In the open, the clearing, the light, the in-between, we are free to see a multitude of possibilities. We can even hold seemingly contradictory possibilities to be true. I discuss this with Addie who says that in imagining, “you can see all the possibilities and you can also hold conflicting thoughts at the same time.” Addie speaks of a television show in which a psychic communicates with the dead. “I believe he is doing it,” she says, “but I don’t know if I believe it can be done.” In our conversation, Addie and I discover that in the open of imagination, one can disbelieve while at the same time wonder, what would it mean to me if this were true? That wondering becomes the basis for action.

Ricoeur (1991: 177) tells us that “imagination is involved in the very process of motivation.” We act because we have imagined ourselves acting. We have played with the possibilities inherent in that imagined course of action. In fact, until we have imagined, we are prevented from acting. Ricoeur (1991: 177-178) continues.

It is imagination that provides the milieu, the luminous clearing in which we can compare and evaluate motives as diverse as desires and ethical obligations, themselves as disparate as professional rules, social customs, or intensely personal values. Imagination offers the common space for the comparison and mediation of terms as heterogeneous as the force that pushes as if from behind, the attraction that seduces as if from in front, and the reasons that legitimate and form a ground as if from beneath.

This mediating power of imagination arises in social interactions and conversation, where we can appropriate meaning together.

In the introduction to Heidegger's *Poetry, Language and Thought*, Albert Tofstadter (1971: xxi) notes that "mutual appropriation becomes the very process by which the emergence into the light and clearing occurs." Mutual appropriation is a social occurrence. It is what happened between Charles Warren and I as we played together and created our sandbox scenes. Yet this playfulness is never removed from the world of real possibility and action. As Gadamer (2000: 106) reminds us, "one can play only with serious possibilities." These serious possibilities carry serious ethical consequences.

I approach the question of ethics in imagination and play with my conversation partners. Stuart Brown responds quite simply saying, "players don't cheat. Players don't deceive." Playing is always a playing-with the other. This excludes play in the sense of "playing with someone's head", taunting or misleading someone. Those games are what Bryce would call solitaire, because there is only one person who is playing and the goal is to exercise power over the other. There is no taking of turns. On the other hand, authentic play draws upon our greatest ethical sense and honors the other. Bernie says that in deep play, "we are compassionate with each other. We can more easily delight in each other's delight...We take much better care of each other. We understand each other more clearly."

The same is true of imagination. In imagining, we can invoke the wicked as well as the beautiful. We can imagine both war and peace. In either case the act of imagining is an act of bringing forth a new world. Once we have imagined this world, it enters into our now. As Addie says, "if I imagine it, I immediately leap to truth." This is why the ethical connotations are so important. If what we imagine could be true, what would that mean for us, for our communities, for the human community as a whole? Ricoeur (1991: 177) tells us that "without imagination there is no action" and that every action carries

with its ethical implications. Thus we can say that our very imagining is as ethically significant as the action it spawns.

This question of the ethics of imagination and play is powerful for me on two levels. One is the ethics of imagination and play themselves as discussed above. The other is the ethical obligation that I, as an organizational development practitioner, carry when inviting people into imagination and play. Imagination and play have the power to transform the self, transform communities and open new frameworks for social action. None of these powers are to be taken lightly. With ethical considerations at the forefront, I will now turn to the “how” of transforming organizations through imagination and play.

Application: Practice and Praxis

Inviting others into the imaginative and playful space is not simply a matter of creating training games or trivial fun activities. As humans we are social-linguistic beings that shape and create our worlds in language. Thus language becomes the context in which principles related to imagination and play are applied to organizational transformation. I discuss this with George Romanko. He asks, “as OD practitioners, realizing that the medium in which we create this new possibility or new way of looking at the world for employees is through language, what can we do to create more of those opportunities?” We can introduce new language, explore generative metaphors, ask powerful questions, and create conversations around simulations and prototypes.

Language and Metaphors

Stacey Yarnall is one of only a handful of people I’ve met who approaches her work in organizations from an ontological orientation. This means a focus on being rather than knowing, and it is directly related to language. Central to Stacey’s approach

is “helping clients find new ways to language the world around them.” For example, instead of talking about goals, strategies and deliverables, as in traditional business language, Stacey shifts to language of “commitments and concerns.” This seemingly simple choice creates entirely new considerations for her clients. The word “commitment” carries with it the idea of a promise and an intention to follow through. Thus the relationship to the other to whom one commits is immediately present with the introduction of the word. Stacey also invites her clients to “make declarations about where they will be in the future.” Here again, a “declaration” moves clients closer to the realm of action than does a “vision.” When we create a vision, we may imagine what the future could be. When we make a declaration about the future, we imagine the action we have taken in order to inhabit that future.

Ricoeur (1991) tells us that imagination is a process of semantic innovation. As we put words together in new ways we create new worlds. This is especially true in the case of generative metaphors. A generative metaphor gives rise to new meaning and serves to frame new possibilities for action. Donald Schon (1993) notes that the particular value of generative metaphors is their “problem-setting” capacity in relationship to organizational transformation. The underlying metaphors and stories we tell in our organizations point to our orientation towards our work and our relationships to others. Susan Bethanis (1995: 192) adds to this saying, “[g]enerative metaphors, especially, have a critical link with organization transformation...inherent in generative conversation is discomfort, intrigue and paradox.” A generative metaphor makes that which is familiar alien to us and at the same time invites us to see the world in new ways.

In terms of organizational transformation, generative metaphors reframe both the organizational development practitioner’s orientation and become a medium for organizational members to explore their work. For example, the organizational development profession has used words like “diagnosis”, “intervention” and “health.”

These words evoke a medical metaphor. The organization is seen as either healthy or sick and the practitioner diagnoses illnesses, prescribes interventions and courses of treatment. As George and I discuss in our conversation, Peter Senge has used the more generative metaphor of organizational development practitioner as “gardener.” With this orientation, the problem is set in a new light. We are now responsible for creating an environment that fosters growth rather than treating a sick patient. This shift creates the tension and paradox Bethanis describes in that with a new metaphor we must imagine our participation in the communities we serve very differently. Both the doctor-patient and the gardener metaphor carry with them an “excess of meaning” (Ricoeur 1988: 169) allowing for multiple interpretations. In this space of multiple interpretations, we play.

“I think a metaphor makes you play,” Bryce tells me. I agree, and also add that “play itself is often a metaphor.” Think of the sandbox scenes that Charles Warren and I created. We played with a visual language, and in our playing generated metaphors about imagination and play in organizations. Recall the similarities in our sandbox scenes. Each included a world of creativity and possibility, a world of day-to-day roles and expectations, and an in-between liminal place (my bridge, Charles’s jungle). It is in our conversation stemming from the sandbox exercise that the metaphors emerge. Charles’s scene depicts figures in boats moving from one world to the other. He tells me, “my model of leadership is someone that can be in one of those boats and move people around.” In this case, the experience of playing together has generated new metaphors, giving Charles and I a platform for exploring the meaning of leadership. A new context for leadership emerges as do many new questions. The metaphor invites us to imagine, what if leaders served as guides, transporting employees from one space to another?

Powerful Questions

If we can see x as y in metaphor, what questions emerge? How is the world reframed? Gadamer (2000: 366) notes that transformation lies not in solving of problem but in “that a question occurs to us that breaks through into the open and thereby makes a new answer possible.” Powerful questions move us from the realm of the now to the realm of what could be. They invite us to imagine. They invite us to play. Juanita Brown (2001) explores the nature of powerful questions in transforming organizations and communities in her doctoral dissertation, *The World Cafe: Living knowledge through conversations that matter*. She recounts the story of her friend and colleague Toke Moller’s experience in working with a community seeking to transform its educational system. Toke invited teachers, administrators and students to explore the potentiality of their school system by asking, “what could a good school also be?” (J. Brown 2001: 129).

This question, “what could a good school also be” is not about problem-solving or fixing. Yet it does evoke action. How could one not imagine what a good school could also be? In that imagining, how could one not see the path to new social action? What is opened up is the “horizon of the question” (Gadamer 2000: 370). This is a horizon stretching beyond what we could see prior to the emergence of the question. Because the horizon of the question is vast and open to multiple interpretations, it invites us to imagine. A powerful question has no singular answer, but rather elicits more questions and greater exploration. As Gadamer (2000: 375) notes, “[q]uestions always bring out the undetermined possibilities of a thing.”

Given that powerful questions often give rise to more and more questions, one might be concerned that questioning could lead to endless “what if” scenarios and little action. However, a question that is artfully crafted becomes a magnet for action. Maturana and Varela (1998) argue that human beings are social-linguistic creatures,

differentiated by our self-organizing nature. We come together around that which has meaning for us. A powerful question can be such an attractor to an autopoietic system. Juanita Brown (2001: 159) shares another powerful example. Her colleague Barbara Waugh had been working with Hewlett Packard around the question, “how can we be the best Industrial Research Lab in the world?” That question opened up some good conversation, however an engineer suggested trying a slightly different question. “How can we be the best Industrial Research Lab for the world?” That question engages the imagination and opens up untold possibilities. Barbara Waugh (in Brown 2001: 159) shares the power of this question in transforming the HP organization.

The web of conversations is expanding. People are making their own local meanings. They’re beginning to start more conversations. And they’re taking action in self-organizing ways in their own units to help answer that question in practical terms.

The question, “how can we be the best for the world” is a question of our being-in-the-world. It calls forth the empathetic imagination, the utopian imagination, the productive imagination. It asks, what is our social responsibility? What is our ethical obligation to the other? What is the place of business in the world? A great question such as this clears the way for great action, precisely because it deeply engages the imagination and our sense of what is meaningful. It demands social organization. It demands testing and exploration of ourselves in relationship to the other. “A question presses itself on us; we can no longer avoid it and persist in our accustomed positions” (Gadamer 2000: 366).

Simulation and Prototyping

The powerful question will not let us be. And so, we must bring it into our world and play with it. We must try it on for size. Simulations, prototypes and models are expressions of play in which questions are given life. Michael Schrage (2000: xvii), in his

book *Serious Play*, argues that innovation in business is an extension of how well or poorly we play with others. “Serious play turns out to be not an ideal but a core competence” (Schrage 2000: xix). Business simulations, prototyping and modeling create a shared space in which organizational members can test limits and assumptions, play with the implications of their potential actions, and consider the ethics and sustainability of proposed strategies.

Schrage (2000) notes that the magic is not so much in the simulations or prototypes as media, but in the social relationships that emerge around them. “In this sense, the value of prototypes resides less in the models themselves than in the interactions – the conversations, arguments, consultations, collaborations – they invite” (Schrage 2000: 20). Simulations and prototypes provoke new social interactions and become a mirror of the organization back to itself. For example, a simulation, prototype or model is grounded in certain assumptions. These assumptions are both revealed and explored in the conversation sparked by the modeling experience. That which an organization refuses to simulate or model (i.e. what is “unimaginable”) speaks as loudly about the organization’s assumptions as that which it does model.

These underlying assumptions inform the history and tradition of an organization. “A critical stage of the process occurs when an idea or concept becomes a working artifact, or prototype, which can then be tested, discussed, shown to customers, and learned from” (Thomke 2001: 68). Once an idea becomes manifest in a prototype it becomes a marker of the community, a document of the community’s learning, an “enlargement of our collective memory” (Ricoeur 1988: 118). Thus a prototype exists in the past, present and future of the community. It is a medium for bringing possibilities into the present in the form of a tangible model. It is based upon assumptions about what could be and therefore lives in the future. And, a prototype becomes a physical representation of the community’s learning that endures and passes into the

community's history. A prototype, therefore, is not merely a thing to play with. It is an opening to the transformative power of play. As Schrage (2000: 156) says, "to become truly engaged in a prototype is to create a new relationship with the self and with others."

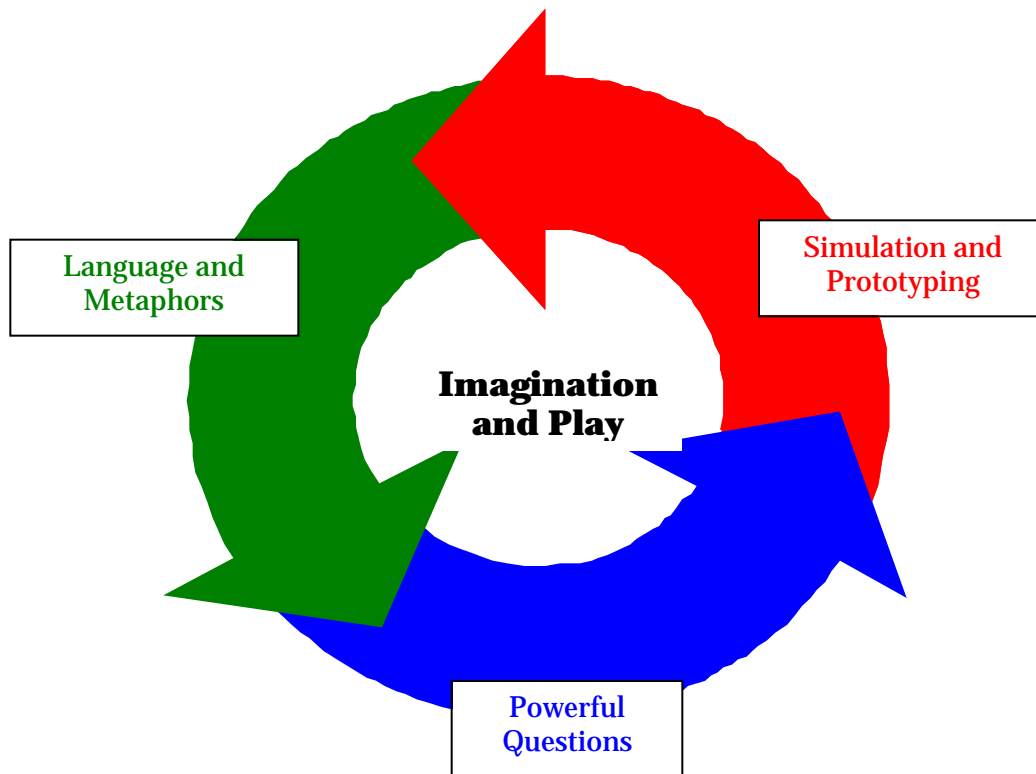
Simulations are a similar incarnation of exploratory play. A simulation is a fiction, a story about a possible future. As we step into a simulation, we are asked to take on roles and play with aspects of the self and relationships with the other. Yet a simulation is not just a game. It can never be removed from the realm of real possibility because the relationships between players exist in the current time and space. Thus, as Schrage (2000) reminds us, they can become highly political. "One popular misconception about simulations and models is that they are safe: that it's permissible to take risks in a virtual world precisely because it is not the real world. This is emphatically not the case" (Schrage 2000: 158). Ever present organizational norms influence the play experience. In some organizations, for example, playing the game with greater skill than one's boss could have political consequences. There is always risk in play, yet we play on.

Integration

In this spirit of play I risk introducing my own model to you, the community of readers of this text. I posit that transformation of the self, transformation in community and new frameworks for social action may be opened up by the integration of new language and metaphors, powerful questions and simulation and prototyping. This model draws upon our pre-figured history and tradition (mimesis ₁), re-figured future (mimesis ₃) and configured present (mimesis ₂) (Ricoeur 1984).

We exist in language, and as such, language frames our conception of what is possible. With new ways of languaging the world around us, we can begin to see new possibilities. This is especially true in the power of generative metaphors to open new

horizons through the creative juxtaposition of language. Such metaphors invite deep questioning of our current horizon of understanding. These powerful questions engage the imagination and create the context for new social action. The questions persist and nag at us. We are compelled to play with what could be. Simulations and prototypes bring the possible into the world of the real and enable us to test our assumptions, the validity of our assertions and the ethical implications of proposed courses of action.



Transformation of organizations through imagination and play is an iterative process. What emerges as new also becomes part of an organization's history and collective memory, thereby becoming its tradition as well. Tradition and innovation are complementary actions (Ricoeur 1984). To innovate is to act anew, yet innovation must recognize the tradition being broken in order to be innovation. Similarly, to hold onto a tradition is to recognize that there is another path as yet explored. Language and

metaphor in this model become both the community's tradition and its starting point for innovation. If we see language and metaphor as our orientation to the world, they become our past-present or mimesis₁. Powerful questions stemming from these underlying assumptions take us into the realm of "what if", the future-present of mimesis₃. Simulation and prototyping allow us to configure the world in the present-present of mimesis₂. As these simulations and prototypes become markers of the community's history, they become part of our root metaphors (Bethanis 1995) and integral to our language. Thus we are brought back to our starting place in language, our house of being.

I offer this model merely as a framing of my own learning about imagination and play, not as a prescription of how to "do" transformation in organizations. My conversation partner, George Romanko, puts this well when he tells me, "maybe there isn't a nailed down application that's so clear and defined, as much as it is maintaining an orientation towards it and finding ways when they naturally reveal themselves." So, I invite you to step into this model more as an orientation or way of looking at transformation in organizations, than a step-by-step approach. Play with it, explore it, see what questions it evokes for you, and share with me what you learn (email kristimcfarland@yahoo.com).

Summary Thoughts

As I started out to write this thesis, my hope was to liberate imagination and play from trivial notions of silliness and fantasy. The power of imagination and play in transforming organizations lies not in crazy hat day, company picnics, or brainstorming sessions. The power of imagination and play resides in our very being. It is a serious power with profound implications for how we orient ourselves to our work and come to

understand one another in community. As Stuart Brown (1998: 258) writes, “stories of play, whether personal or professional, will continue to enchant, beguile and inspire us. Within them lie the energies for discovering more vital meaningful lives.”

My own story of imagination and play in organizations stems from my history and tradition as an organizational development practitioner, my imagining of what is possible in human community, my playing with potential courses of action, and my assessment of the ethical implications. While this thesis reflects my current horizon of understanding, that horizon is not fixed. It will forever be enlarged through my playing and imagining with others. For as Bernie DeKoven says, “the opposite of play is death.” And, in the words of Paul Ricoeur (1991: 177), “without imagination, there is no action.”

To act: to create organizations that are more socially conscious, humane and ethically grounded, we must imagine them first as being so. We must play with the possibilities, find new ways to language the world, invent new metaphors for our organizations, ask the powerful and transforming questions, test and explore our proposed courses of action. In so doing we will be transformed as individuals and as communities aiming towards greater understanding of one another and shared meaning. As Martin Heidegger (1971: 9) reminds us,

All our heart's courage is the
echoing response to the
first call of Being which
gathers our thinking into the
play of the world.

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