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Third-order Organizational Change and the Western Mystical Tradition

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In our joint work on organizational change (Bartunek and Moch, 1987; Moch and Bartunek, 1990), we have distinguished between first-order, second-order, and third-order change. First-order change is incremental, involving behavioural adjustments considered appropriate within an organization's or organization subgroup's established set of implicit or explicit beliefs about how the organization does or should act. For example, such change might result in increased skill in participative decision making based on an already shared agreement that participation is valuable. First-order change is based on the assumption that a schema in use can guide individuals to grasp and implement new behaviours.

Second-order change refers to changes in the cognitive frameworks underlying the organization's activities, changes in the deep structure or shared schemata that generate and give meaning to these activities (Egri and Frost, 1991; Gersick, 1991). In this type of change the understanding of a concept such as participation in decision making might change. Perhaps consultation was the original shared understanding of participation, but now employee ownership might be a prerequisite for employees to feel they really are participating. This type of change is based on the assumption that a new schema is sometimes required if new behaviours are to be understood and adopted.

Third-order change is designed to give organization members the opportunity to transcend schemata. It refers to changes that lead them to:

- become aware of benefits and limitations of their shared schema;
- recognize how this schema and all schemata limit as well as guide understanding; and
- to become more effective at evaluating and changing schemata.

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These changes ultimately are aimed at increasing their capacity to understand and evaluate their interpretation of any particular situation. For example, employees experiencing this type of change might become aware of multiple implicit schemata available for interpreting participation, become cognizant of some of the limitations of each and, on the basis of this recognition, be more sensitive to the implicit value choices associated with any selection they might make.

While third-order change may seem simple on paper, it is very difficult to achieve in practice, primarily because it must be based on a transconceptual mode of understanding. Third-order change refers to a process in which schemata themselves become objects for continuous cognitive innovation and development. Schemata, however, cannot give meaning to themselves. It is not possible to grasp fully the relativity of schemata using a schema, because any schema selected for this purpose would itself be self-consciously context bound. Understanding schemata as objects therefore requires that the analyst be exposed to a source of meaning beyond that which can be conceptually grasped and understood.

First- and second-order organizational changes do not transcend human cognitive capabilities. They can therefore be called secular phenomena. Achieving the capacity for third-order change, however, presumes experience that is transconceptual, not subsumed by individual or social cognitive structures. It is therefore in some sense analogous to mystical experience, predicated on a leap of faith (Bateson and Bateson, 1987, pp. 95-6). We therefore may understand third-order change better by exploring the dimensions of mystical experience, and this exploration may contribute to an expanded potential for organization development and change efforts.

Our work to date has focused primarily on second-order change (Bartunek, 1993). There has been relatively little theoretical development of third-order change, a shortcoming we hope to remedy somewhat in this article. To accomplish our task, we will begin with a dilemma associated with second- order change, one which can be resolved by realizing the potential for third-order change. Discussion of this dilemma should foster awareness of differences among three levels of experience which become increasingly more similar to mystical experience. We will describe characteristics of mysticism that are particularly pertinent to understanding third-order change in organizations and use these characteristics to shed light on the nature of third-order organizational change. Finally, we will begin to model a process by which this type of change might be nurtured.

A Dilemma that Makes the Capacity for Third-order Change Necessary

Second-order change, the attempt to change organizational members' shared schemata, often presents change agents with a dilemma (Moch and Bartunek, 1990). How can a change-agent move a client system from one mode of

understanding to another? Will not his/her efforts be interpreted only in terms of the mode of understanding the agent is trying to change? And what of change-agents? Are they prone to misinterpret the client system because they use a mode of understanding that is different from that of the client system? What schema or mode of understanding makes the concepts of understanding and misunderstanding meaningful? How is it possible that a mode of understanding can be the medium for understanding itself?

This dilemma arises from a confusion of logical types (Bateson and Bateson, 1987). Client systems and change agents employ modes of understanding to interpret their experience. The modes then are the media through which experience is given form and meaning. Once modes themselves become apparent, however, they cease being the media and become the objects of observation, manipulation and change. There still must be a mode – some form of non-schematic or transconceptual understanding – acting as the interpretive device. This mode, however, cannot understand itself, although it can be used to understand, manipulate and change schemata employed in the cognitive mode. The process of planned schematic (second-order) change in organizations, presumes a higher-order platform from which such change can be viewed, change strategies can be devised, and from which change attempts can be launched, evaluated, and revised.

It is the nature of this platform, the nature of the understanding capable of generating third-order change, that is the object of discussion in this article[1]. We start our discussion by suggesting that first-order change can be initiated by digital communication. Then we argue that second-order change may require some form of analogical communication[2]. Building on this discussion, we will characterize third-order change as initiated by openness to transconceptual experience – events not adequately represented by digital categories or by analogical transfers of meaning from one context to another. We will suggest that a model for understanding and initiating such experiences is available in the tradition of Western Christian mystics[3]. By delineating the attributes of the mystical experience, we therefore may gain insight into characteristics of the experience of third-order change and the means for initiating such experiences as part of planned change attempts in organizations.

First-order Change Can Be Initiated by Digital Communication

We have defined first-order change as adjustments that are called for by an established shared set of beliefs or understandings. Given a set of assumptions about how a product ought to be produced, for example, changes in the production process will be made as a function of characteristics of the input material, variable attributes of the throughput process, and information about the nature of the marketplace. Given a set of cause-effect assumptions, information is required to select specific throughput activities. Changes in these activities will be a function of changes in the values of variables believed to affect the outcomes. Information about the values of these variables therefore will play a critical role in effecting changes in the behaviour of the system. Daft and

Lengel (1986), after many others (e.g., Miller and Frick, 1949; Shannon and Weaver, 1949) define information in terms of uncertainty reduction. A bit of information may be taken to be an answer to a yes-no question. Uncertainty is the difference between the amount of information required to perform the task and the amount of information already possessed by the organization (Galbraith, 1977). The amount of information required to reduce uncertainty will be a function of the number of yes-no questions required to select the most appropriate response (Attneave, 1959). It follows, then, that changes in a system's response will be a function of changes in the pattern of answers to a finite set of questions that can be answered by either a yes or a no. Communication that conveys these answers is by definition digital.

Second-order Change May Be Initiated by Analogical Communication

In addition to defining information in terms of uncertainty reduction, Daft and Lengel (1986) distinguish between uncertainty reduction and the reduction of equivocality. For them, equivocality refers to the absence of a shared understanding of the situation. Under equivocal conditions, asking a yes-no question is not feasible, since "participants are not certain about what questions to ask, and if questions are posed, the situation is ill-defined to the point where a clear answer will not be forthcoming" (1986, p. 556-7). The problem organizations face when confronting equivocality is of identifying a schema or set of assumptions which function to interpret the situation and from which an appropriate set of behavioural responses can be deduced. Once a schema is identified, digital information may be required to select particular activities for particular conditions. Until such a schema is found, however, digital information will be uninterpretable.

We will define analogical communication as communication that is capable of conveying interpretive schemata from one situation to another. A central component in such communication frequently is a root metaphor or image that serves to evoke a set of beliefs understood to apply to a different situation in a new context (Ortony, 1979). Individuals in organizations faced with equivocal situations, therefore, may employ previous direct experience or experience gained vicariously and, seeing this experience to have attributes similar to those being experienced under equivocal conditions, import the interpretive scheme used in a different context to reduce the equivocality associated with the current situation.

Third-order Change May Be Initiated by Communication beyond Digital Categories or Analogical Transfers

The capability for third-order change requires greater awareness than that afforded simply by the experience of on-going second-order changes. This experience must be linked to an appreciation of the inability of any schema to capture the contingencies present in any given situation. To achieve this appreciation, a person must be aware of experience that cannot be contained in or represented by any conceptual scheme, and must be exposed to a form of

communication that is not simply analogical, but that exposes the person to transconceptual reality that provides the ground for conceptual human understanding.

Some forms of human communication approach this degree of richness. Great music, painting, dance and poetry may communicate experience and even transconceptual understanding of the experience (e.g. Maritain, 1968), although they are not the experience itself. By painting or otherwise portraying subjects or events, however, such communication is essentially analogical, transposing an event or observation from one setting to another through whichever aesthetic medium is selected. Great works involve more than their authors. They may succeed in involving members of the audience as participants in the interpretive process. Moreover, some art forms are designed intentionally to resist analogical interpretations by confronting the audience with incompatible analogical images (Hofstadter, 1979). Linked together in a liturgy, a combination of such aesthetic experiences can take a participant – or perhaps more appropriately, a communicant – close to having an experience which appears to put the participant in direct touch with something completely "other": an object (or subject?) the experience of which (or whom) is neither conceptual nor conceptualizable.

Mystical Experience: A Model for Developing Third-order Change Capacity in Organizations

Aesthetic experience is distinct from mystical experience (e.g. Merton, 1951, p. 62). Mystics may attempt to capture their experience using aesthetic media, but the experience itself cannot be captured by analogies. It must be distinguished from that which is communicated as the map must be distinguished from the territory (Korzybski, 1950). The Christian mystical tradition provides a model which might be helpful in our attempt to point beyond the analogies and describe some of the attributes of transconceptual experience. In addition to the obvious and historically rich aesthetic tradition provided primarily by the Roman Catholic church, writings of and about Christian mystics provide a bountiful source of information and insight about how individuals have come to experience directly what they variously call God, the Goddess, the Underlying Unity of Existence, or the Other. Approaches to mysticism vary considerably, and we cannot hope to review the literature here. This has been done elsewhere (e.g. Callahan, 1992; Dupré and Wiseman, 1988; Egan, 1982, 1984; James, 1958; Maréchal, 1964; Scholem, 1954; Woods, 1980). Within the limitations of this article however, we can summarize aspects of the tradition that appear particularly pertinent to organizational change and begin to develop some of the implications for understanding and facilitating efforts directed towards realizing third-order change in organizations. We will begin by focusing on its essential elements.

William James (1958) describes the mystical experience as having four essential attributes: ineffability, passivity, transience and a noetic quality. Ineffability means that it must be experienced directly in order to be understood.

The experience cannot be communicated digitally or analogically. Passivity means that the subject cannot control the mystical experience. It is always experienced as a gift, as coming from outside, not something that can be taken or somehow deserved. The person feels in the power of something superior, acted on rather than acting (Egan, 1982). Mystical states are transient. They do not last long, although their effects are enduring (Callahan, 1992; Underhill, 1961). They also tend to recur several times throughout one's life (Dupré, 1988). Finally, the noetic quality of mystical experiences means that they convey knowledge that transcends human cognitive understanding. They are, in this sense, ultimately meaningful. They thereby expose the limitations of human cognition (Egan, 1982), moving the subject to a higher order of understanding in which particular beliefs and ideologies are experienced as trivial and illusory (Underhill, 1960). Additional attributes of the mystical experience that may be helpful to those seeking to achieve third-order change capacity are summarized below.

The Mystical Experience Is Not Simply Deepened Self-understanding or Self-integration

An assumption that self-knowledge is the highest possible ideal treats mysticism in a way that is equivalent to a kind of narcissistic ecstasy (Buber, 1972; Egan, 1982; Zaehner, 1961). Rather than focusing on the self, mystics experience a palpable union with an ineffable mystery, typically described in the Christian tradition as a loving and truthful God. According to Egan (1984), the felt presence of a living union with this God purifies, illuminates, and eventually transforms mystics into truth and love themselves. The experience is not one through which the mystic finds wholeness solely as an individual. It is one through which the individual finds wholeness through the seamless continuity joining individuals together in a loving communion with that which is infinitely more than they.

Bateson's concept of God as a mental system of ecological size or larger of which the single human being is a subsystem may be useful for carrying this point (Bateson and Bateson, 1987, p. 135). This conception, at least for those who do not consider themselves to be religious (and perhaps for many who do) might provide an image of what mystics refer to as the experience of the dissolution of the distinction between the perceiver and the perceived, the part and the whole, and the individual and the community. Far from being an experience in which the primary referent is oneself, mystics experience their part of the whole, their inseparability from the ungraspable mental process that is God.

The Mystical Experience Is Seen as Occurring in a Sequence of Vertically Arranged Levels or Steps

In the Christian tradition, the process through which the mystical encounter with God is achieved has, since the sixth century, been described using vertical imagery (Dupré, 1988). The mystical journey is treated as involving ascents through multiple stages. Individuals initially bound by particular perspectives

or images of God ascend through a series of understandings that appear to be nested in a vertical hierarchy. Passage to a higher level requires that one move through the level beneath it. Each movement requires the destruction of previous partial insights or illusions, until the person attains an openness to the transconceptual experience of God. Each successively higher understanding involves an expansion of horizons, an enlarged world view in which contradictions implicit in previous understandings are reconciled and their underlying unity appreciated.

The different stages, which are conceptually but not experientially distinct, are commonly referred to as the purgative, illuminative, and unitive ways (Dupré, 1988; Egan, 1984; John of the Cross, 1953; Smith, 1977). In the first, purgative stage, after initial awakening of the mystical desire, the potential mystic experiences a long preparation period that includes an ascetic life, purging of sinfulness, and an increased capacity for love. In the second, illuminative stage, all the faculties, feeling, intellect and will must be cleansed and brought into harmony with God. Within this stage the presence of God begins to become an experienced reality, not simply a projection of the imagination. Through both of these stages the person experiences cognitive disengagement and re-engagement, occasions when previous cognitive categories become unsatisfactory, but new more encompassing ones have not yet developed to replace them. The final stage is the unitive life, in which the person beholds God directly and is joined with God in a progressive union. In this stage mystics know experientially that God is in them and that they have become one in God through love (Zaehner, 1961).

The passage through the purgative to the illuminative stage is extremely difficult, and certainly not traversed by everyone who begins the mystical journey. The passage also requires intellectual strength, for it takes considerable mental activity to engage in true contemplation (Merton, 1951). Merton notes that conceptual understanding may even be a prerequisite for transconceptual experience. Passage from the illuminative to unitive stage is more difficult still. For this passage to occur, the person must undergo what John of the Cross (1953) called the "dark night" of the soul or spirit. This means in part that mystics must have their sense of personal integrity and unity shattered if they are to achieve the necessary transformation into a new understanding.

The experience of the dark night involves a number of dimensions, including a sense that God has abandoned the person, an intense sense of sinfulness, emotional boredom, a sense of a powerless intellect and will, and an awareness of how trite earlier experiences of God have been (Underhill, 1961). We can begin to grasp this sort of experience by projecting from our own social experiences. Fitzgerald (1984, p. 101) notes, for example, that the dark night process "presupposes that, in every significant relationship, we come to the experience of limitation, our own and others'. We come to the point where we must withdraw and reclaim our projections of God, of friend…and let the 'others' be who and what they are: mystery." Merton (1951) views the dark night as a progressive loss of the cognitive mode of understanding, a mode which, but for the leap of faith,

is a human being's only grasp on the world. In fact, a true dark night involves mystical death.

The Mystical Experience Is Not Divorced from the World of Action

Mystics are transformed by their experience; it leads them to become energized and reinvested in concrete action in and on behalf of the world. It is as though the experience of the underlying unity of creation drives them to action on behalf of the whole. From this perspective, the parts of this system are in determinant, albeit unknown, relationships, and those who violate the delicate ecological balance do so at their (and others') peril.

Mystics Have a Creative and Prophetic Function

The actions mystics take tend to be novel and creative (Callahan, 1992; Greene, 1988; Woods, 1980). Woods notes, for example, that mystics' experiences often lead them to re-evaluate and reorganize existing systems and to be able to use images very creatively for this purpose. Teresa of Avila (1979) described the spiritual journey as occurring in the soul's "interior castle", and Catherine of Sienna (Nofke, 1983) saw God as a "sea" in whom the soul is immersed.

Mystics are creative because, while basing their actions on their experience, they simultaneously distrust their interpretation of this experience and therefore are open to ongoing interpretation and reinterpretation. Mystics affirm what they understand but deny that their understanding is in any sense complete, comprehensive or even constant:

> There are therefore two ways to God: a way of affirmation and a way of denial. These two ways are not offered for us to select according to our own taste. We have to take both. We must affirm and deny at the same time. One cannot go without the other. If we go on affirming, without denying, we end up by affirming that we have delimited the Being of God in our concepts. If we go on denying without affirming, we end up by denying that our concepts can tell the truth about (God) in any sense whatever (Merton, 1951, p. 94)

Since the simultaneous presence of affirmation and denial arising out of transconceptual understanding is an essential part of the genre, mystics have a prophetic social function. They raise the visibility of the limitations of existing interpretive images and challenge them in creative ways. Woods (1980, p. 5) comments that, "the mystic's tortuous process of social and cognitive disengagement and re-engagement is, in effect, a psychic laboratory in which a society renews its spiritual vigor without itself being subject to the temporary immobilization necessary for the process".

The Mystic as Change Agent: The Case of Teresa of Avila

A pre-eminent example of mysticism and its effects in an organizational setting, including the resistance it can engender, is the great Spanish mystic, Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) (see Bilinkoff, 1989; Dupré and Wiseman, 1988; Egan, 1984; Lincoln, 1984; Luti, 1991; Sullivan, 1984; and Teresa of Avila, 1957, 1979; for descriptions and summaries of her life and writings). The Carmelite convent

Teresa originally joined as a teenager was quite lax, with comparatively little attention paid to the spiritual life. However, Teresa learned, to some extent on her own, means of mental prayer (seen by many in Spain at the time as highly suspicious). Beginning in her late thirties she experienced a series of conversions that allowed her spiritual life to flourish and confirmed her entrance into a unitive form of prayer.

Teresa recorded her experiences at the request of her spiritual guides. They serve as both a road map for, and as a testimony to, transconceptual understanding. Her writings are full of descriptions of rapture juxtaposed with statements of scepticism and concern that her sense of being visited by God may be an hallucination. She provides considerable advice concerning how to determine whether one's understanding is from oneself or received as a gift. Her descriptions give repeated testimony that true understanding does not come from within but is given, often even imposed, from without. She notes, for example, that "the mind…does not reason – I mean that it does not work, but stands as if amazed at the many things it understands. For God wills it to realize that it understands nothing at all of what His Majesty places before it" (Teresa of Avila, 1957, p. 71).

The soul, Teresa contends, "…cannot comprehend what it understands, it understands by not understanding" (1957, p. 127). Finally, the will, seeking communion with God, must actively control the cognitive faculties of the memory and the imagination. Teresa warns that "…the memory and the imagination might do (the will) serious harm by trying to give it a picture of what it is enjoying" (1957, p. 99).

Teresa's most famous image is that of an "interior castle" composed of seven nested dwelling places, each representing a deeper and more profound experience of God (Teresa of Avila, 1979). While the castle exists within each person, it represents the dwelling place of God. Through the first three dwelling places, the communicant's efforts are important determinants of further progress. After the fourth, however, greater understanding is experienced as a gift. In the seventh dwelling place the communicant experiences death as an individual and spiritual union with God. Progress through the dwelling places requires pain. Movement through initial stages or dwelling places must confront what Teresa calls "lower level" sufferings (Teresa of Avila, 1979, p. 115), including physical and social pain (e.g., gossip and misunderstanding). Arrival at the seventh dwelling place, however, requires that the communicant must die, as a silkworm must undergo a metamorphosis before it can emerge from the cocoon as a moth. This death, moreover, cannot be accomplished without considerable agony, including the experience of being unalterably separated from God. Following the requisite "purification", however, the communicant can enter into the Unity that is God as a stream of light enters a room through a window and becomes one with light entering from other passages.

As Teresa's mystical life developed, so did her awareness that she could not lead a truly contemplative life in the convent where she was living. As a consequence, Teresa decided to begin a new type of Carmelite convent in Avila

that would be organized much differently, with a new type of organizational structure and with a much greater attention to mental prayer. As part of this changed structure, she decided that the convent should be dependent on alms rather than on fixed incomes tied to land investments, and she changed the titles and room assignments used at the convent so that all the sisters would be treated as equals.

These were clear second-order changes. They, along with some of the other changes she envisioned, were extremely radical for the time. For example, they threatened the city élites, who were used to providing ongoing financial support for their daughters living in convents in a way that ensured the daughters' continued dependence on their families. The changes also threatened Church officials, who were afraid of the diversity in prayer styles implied by mental prayer, and who wanted to assure that non-theologians – women in particular – prayed only in Church-approved ways (Bilinkoff, 1989; Luti, 1991). The new convent met with considerable opposition, and several attempts were made to close it. However, Teresa was convinced that these changes were necessary if the sisters were to develop their own relationships with God. She worked hard to gain the support of a bishop and of a small number of influential priests who had similar ideals to hers. Together they eventually succeeded in convincing city and Church officials to allow her convent to remain. Slowly she founded more and more convents whose styles of life were consistent with her values, and wrote them down into a new organizational plan for her religious order. Eventually she was viewed as a great reformer of the entire Carmelite order, developing a way of thinking about the monastic life that endured for centuries. Throughout her lifetime of establishing convents and fostering a way of life based on the goal of mystical experience, she met opposition from people threatened by her novel ideas. She usually prevailed, but not without constant struggle. The difficulties she encountered make it clear that implementation of novel and creative ideas for organizational development and renewal are likely to meet opposition, regardless of whether the change effort is stimulated by a comparatively mundane experience or by mystical encounter. They also suggest that a mystical encounter can help give a person the courage to face and see beyond others' difficulties in understanding in a way that enables them to persist in difficult but important change projects.

Application in Organizational Settings

The experience of western Christian mystics is a form of transconceptual understanding that cannot be grasped, much less translated, into cognitive categories and communicated analogically or digitally. While cognitive and aesthetic media can be and are used to reference this understanding, mystics are painfully aware of their limitations. Therefore they simultaneously affirm and deny any representation which relies on these types of devices. Freed from the assumption that any interpretation of experience can fully grasp the reality it references, mystics have a greater capacity to move from one representation to another without losing their existential anchor. This, perhaps, is what the

mystics have to offer those interested in facilitating third-order organizational change. To raise a client system above any particular conception of itself and its environment, the change agent must first have this capacity in him or herself, and must then expose the client system to it. Otherwise the system will not be able to appreciate the essential relativity of any conception and will be incapable of transcending conceptions as such.

First-order changes can be effected by providing digital information which initiates changes consistent with a shared schema-in-use (e.g. a "no" answer to the question "is the organization performing satisfactorily?"). When a series of first-order changes fails to lead to changes in the information input (e.g. a "yes" response to the question "is the organization performing satisfactorily?"), the client system may be prepared to consider alternative schemata. That is, it may become receptive to second-order change. After the application of a succession of second-order changes, members may be prepared to question the adequacy of any particular schema (Moch and Bartunek, 1990). However, they are not likely to transcend schemata *per se* until they have experienced an alternative, an interpretation or understanding that is not schematic. Without this experience, they are likely to continue to search for a schematic interpretation until, perhaps associated with lowering expectations, one is found.

It is difficult to avoid the inference that change agents must encourage spiritual development in the client system in order to facilitate third-order change. However, we are using the mystical experience as a model, not as the only path to change; transconceptual knowledge is not wholly identical with mystical experience. Mysticism provides guidelines short of requiring that we all become mystics. Nevertheless, it indicates the depth of personal change necessary for change agents to be able to foster third-order organizational change. To begin the third-order change process, change agents can encourage participants to delve into and share their own cognitive assumptions in ways that allow the diversity of perspectives to surface. Thus, participants might be led to begin to grasp the limitations and relative nature of any particular cognitive scheme, including the one guiding their current understanding. An alternative approach would involve structuring shared musical, literary, or other aesthetic experiences which would expand clients' interpretive repertoire and, by illustrating contrasting alternative interpretations, demonstrate the strengths and benefits of each alternative.

By considering alternative understandings and then focusing on what is lost as well as gained as each is evaluated, change agents may be able cognitively if not experientially to communicate an appreciation of the limited and relative nature of cognitive understanding in general. With each second-order change previous shared understandings would be challenged, alternatives highlighted, and the potential for general agreement on a new, more encompassing understanding evoked. The process of developing the capacity for third-order change, therefore, may consist of sets of hierarchically linked second-order changes. The experience also may nurture the capacity for the transconceptual

experience required to secure experiential appreciation of the very limited ability of any conceptual scheme to grasp the nature of reality experienced as itself.

The resulting change strategy can be more finely developed using the attributes and elements of mystical experience as guides. We suggest below some of the ways the characteristics of mystical experience we have described can inform the third-order change process.

Achieving the Capacity for Third-Order Change May Be Facilitated by Designing Change Strategies Containing a Sequence of Hierarchically Arranged or Nested Steps

The change strategy may involve three primary stages:

(1) developing the capacity for first-order change,

(2) developing the capacity for second-order change, and

(3) developing the capacity for third-order change.

Far from being incompatible, these capabilities might be linked, with higher-order abilities requiring lower-order ones (Merton, 1951). Just as conceptual understanding seems to be a prerequisite for transconceptual understanding, so lower-order change capability may be a prerequisite for higher-order change capability.

The third stage may itself consist of hierarchically-ordered steps. As alternative schemata governing specific situations are sequentially assessed to identify their limitations, increasingly generic alternatives may be identified in order to avoid the conclusion that the limitations are a consequence of how finely schemata are tuned to meet specific needs. The change agent would attempt to help the client system conclude that the problem is not that too much is being expected of a given schema, but that cognitive understanding itself is of limited utility.

If mystical experience is an appropriate guide in this process, change agents might expect increasing discomfort, pain, and a shattering of more than just conceptual knowledge as the client system progresses through the various stages, particularly at the point where the boundaries of presumed knowledge are breached but not yet replaced by a transconceptual alternative. As participants proceed through stages of increasing generality, the severity of both the dark night experience and exhilaration associated with broadening understanding are likely to increase until the quantitative changes in generality are transformed into a qualitative shift where cognitive understanding is significantly lessened in importance and a transconceptual alternative is adopted.

Third Order Change May Focus on the Unity between the Organization and Its Environment

As mystical experience is directed outward, so the goal of developing third-order change capacity may usefully be directed towards grasping the organization-environment relationship as a whole. Third-order change informed by the

mystical experience is not an organizational version of narcissistic ecstasy (Zaehner, 1961). Rather, it is an attempt to impress the organization with the limitations of its own self-conceptions by focusing on the mystery of experience beyond it. In the case of individual organizational members, this may be advanced by structuring significant encounters beyond organizational boundaries (Fitzgerald, 1984).

Third Order Change Strategies May Be Directed towards the Creation of Settings Rather than the Structuring of Experiences

Third-order change may be directed towards the process rather than the content of understanding. Transconceptual understanding is experienced as a gift received rather than an individual accomplishment. If the model of mystical experience is a useful guide, it will not be possible for change agents to evoke or control the experience of third-order change. Moreover, the experience cannot be taught discursively, because it cannot be digitally or analogically communicated. To do so would presume the type of schematic understanding that third-order change seeks to transcend. Such communication would irredeemably alter the phenomenon (Bateson and Bateson, 1987, p. 80). Change agents may reference the experience, and link second-order changes designed to encourage understanding of third-order change for those who are able to stay with the process. Change agents also can comfort and cajole, confirm and challenge. However, it may not be possible to transfer their knowledge or understanding to the client system.

Realizing Third-order Change Capability Can Be Expected to Affect Participants' Involvement in Daily Activities, Including Fostering Their Creativity

If transconceptual understanding is essentially holistic, reducing the distinction between the perceiver and the perceived and creating an appreciation of the necessity for maintaining ecological balance, developing the capacity for third-order change should also lead to greater social concern. Consequently, if the model of mystical experience holds true, third-order change capacity is likely to change the way participants act towards others. Like mystical experience, third order change should enable those who experience it to act in novel and creative ways for the benefit of humanity; although this may not always be recognized as such by those who are threatened by the resulting actions. Attempts to develop third-order change capacity therefore have unavoidable political and ethical implications.

If transconceptual experience is to realize its organizational potential, it must be experienced by organization members who have the capacity to share their developing vision in a way that inspires others and, perhaps, helps them to develop their own capacity for grasping beyond their conceptual reach. Those high in the hierarchy are obvious candidates. However, it is not only hierarchically powerful organizational members who might share the transcendent experience. Teresa of Avila was not initially in a powerful position; although some powerful priests and a bishop in the Church eventually

sanctioned her reform initiative. However, Teresa had not only a mystical life punctuated by a great variety of experience, but also an appreciation of what a Carmelite Convent should be like to be true to its mission. Persons acquiring third-order change capability therefore may be expected to seek to have an impact on those around them. Third-order change strategies might anticipate this source of energy and help to support if not direct it.

Modelling of the Process of Third-order Change

The third-order change process as we have suggested it here has few precedents in the organizational change literature; Torbert (1987, 1991) is one of the few authors to talk about experiences that are at all similar. If pursued, a great deal of thought must go into modelling the process and studying its implementation. To date we have not detailed such a model in any depth. We have, however, introduced some of the elements involved (Bartunek and Moch, 1987; Moch and Bartunek, 1990, ch. 7), and we will develop some of these ideas here.

Change Agents Must Initiate a Series of Second-order Changes

In general, facilitating the capacity for third-order change involves a change agent initiating a series of second-order changes that are framebreaking and that foster experiencing events from multiple perspectives. Several tactics can be used to foster this type of change. For example, when an organization is culturally diverse, attempts to build on differences in perspectives can be useful in moving members beyond their original schemata (Cox, 1991). Bartunek, *et al.* (1983) suggest another tactic; the development of informal structures that consciously enable participants to operate using different perspectives. People from different functional areas of an organization might help other organization members view problems from the different departments' perspectives. Kilman (1985) indicates how matrix organizations might be used to accomplish the same end. Outward bound or equivalent experiences in completely different cultural settings in which normal perspectives are not useful might also be considered (Mirvis, 1990).

Siporin and Gummer (1988) suggest the possible use of tactics designed for family therapy such as paradoxical reframing, in which organizational members' behavior is relabelled and redefined using some contradictory or illogical feature. Torbert (1991, ch. 5) describes several possible liberating structures in organizations that might accomplish this effect. Such structures have eight essential characteristics:

(1) deliberate irony;

(2) tasks that are incomprehensible and undoable without reference to accompanying processes and purposes;

(3) premeditated and precommunicated structural evolution over time;

(4) a constant cycle of experiential and empirical research and feedback to participants;

(5) the use of all available forms of power by the leadership to accomplish liberation;

(7) a structure that is open to inspection and challenge by organization members, leadership vulnerability to attack if it behaves inauthentically; and

(8) leadership committed to and practised in managing personal and organizational incongruities.

These structures and processes are all tools that can be used in the service of challenging understandings or creating a sense of impasse in a present understanding. Serious organizational and societal problems which are confronted honestly can accomplish this purpose as well. Fitzgerald (1984, p. 105) notes that:

> We close off the breaking in of God into our lives if we cannot admit into consciousness the situations of profound impasse we face personally and societally… The "no way out" trials of our personal lives are but a part of the far more frightening situations of national and international impasse that have been formed by the social, economic, and political forces of our time.

Change Agents Must Be Responsive to Difficult Feelings

Confronting participants with their cognitive limitations is very difficult. It can create not only conceptual confusion but emotional confusion as well. As Teresa noted concerning the spiritual progress of her charges, "When their understanding ceases to work it is more than they can bear" (Teresa of Avila, 1957, p. 82). In addition to fostering cognitive movement, change agents must be responsive to managing a number of very difficult feelings, such as anger, a strong sense of loss, anxiety or hopelessness, and conflict and tension experienced among organizational members. Such feelings are necessary for the experience to be passed through in depth, without being trivialized or minimized.

Outcomes of the Experience

The hope and expectation is that at some point, most likely after a very long period of time, organizational members who are able to stay with the process will be drawn into the compelling sense of mystery associated with the understanding that any perspective out of which they might operate is very limited; it does not map onto a "truth" which exists independently of perceivers. At this point participants will have undergone what Bateson (1972) calls "learning III" and be "converted" to a perspective that views perspectives themselves as problems or as solutions for grasping "reality" which must ultimately be regarded as mysterious.

However, this is not the conclusion of the experience. Those who attain the capacity for such experience will enact it. Just as Teresa of Avila's criterion of the authenticity of the mystical experience is in the action it subsequently evokes (Teresa of Avila, 1957, p. 175), so those who develop a third-order change

capacity may become involved in guiding other people and groups along a path towards a greater reverence and appreciation for the mystery of experience (Hammarskjöld, 1967). The creative ways people who have this experience act are likely to meet with resistance from those threatened by them. But they have the potential to be transforming for the broader sphere of organizational life.

Conclusion

What we have written here may not seem very practical, especially to organization members worried about next quarter's profits or whether their organization is about to be acquired. Dealing with concerns such as these is likely to be experienced as much more urgent and much more "doable", at least in the short term. Such concerns are also likely to be associated with comparatively little ultimate meaning, a sense of emptiness. But in their emptiness, the experience of day-to-day problems can represent an important impasse and opening into transcendence. Dupré (1988, p. 23) comments:

> Any quest for spiritual meaning today requires an inward turn, however much the ultimate goal may be communal. Yet here a new problem arises. For what the believing, or even the searching, person encounters within himself [sic] is the same spiritual emptiness that pervades our entire culture. Painful as such a confrontation with one's inner silence is for most of our contemporaries, it constitutes a basic condition for establishing any spiritual life by liberating us from the illusion of having one and throwing us back upon our own inner poverty. But how do we convey a positive sense to religious emptiness? Precisely at this point the faithful seeker may turn to the spiritual masters of the past. For they also, in very different circumstances, felt this sense of absence, yet converted the night of absence into the very meeting place between God and the soul.

Notes

1. The perceptive reader may infer that, by virtue of the fact that we are presuming to talk about third-order change, there must be a higher-order platform from which we are viewing this process. If this is the case, however, we cannot discern it, for this would require an even higher level of understanding which we do not claim to understand. We cannot conceptually grasp a level higher than third-order change, only experience it as mystery. The first step toward such understanding, therefore, may be to take the experience of the mysterious as the object of discussion and analysis, and this is precisely what we are proposing to do.
2. This order presumes that digital communication is predicated on analogical understanding rather than vice-versa.
3. Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and other cultures and religions have important mystical traditions (Scholem, 1954); but we are less familiar with them and therefore do not discuss them here.

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