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Critical Connections and Emergence

As we navigate the complex world in which we find ourselves, a world that includes an expanding reliance on the internet and social media, we are learning that *critical connections can be more powerful than critical mass*. During the last decades of the 20th century, there was a lot excitement among social scientists and cultural anthropologists about the “hundredth monkey” phenomenon—a belief that ‘critical mass’ could change the collective consciousness or group behavior of a species, including the human species. Organizational development theory and change management emphasized the importance of ‘scaling up’ innovative ideas to change the culture of an organization. However, the dawning of the 21st century brought with it a shift in the capacity to connect on a global level at exponentially faster and faster speeds. The new technologies of global connectedness created unimaginable ways to connect people and ideas. Ideas emerge within and across networks rather than incrementally connecting person-to-person or expanding from a team to the larger organization. We are seeing how critical connections can impact the world on a global scale—for good and for ill.

We have watched as innovative ideas emerge, starting almost imperceptively then become more and more dominant within a society. Examples include the ‘farm to table’ movement, the phenomenon of micro loans and other initiatives that sustain cottage industries and promote self-sufficiency in developing countries; the use of renewable energies and electric cars. A common denominator in every emerging idea or movement is that people must *find one another and connect to one another in ways previously unimaginable or unavailable to them*. Meg Wheatley and Deborah Frieze have developed a model that explains declining and emerging systems. They refer to this model as the ‘two-loop’ life cycle. Deborah Frieze’s [compelling TEDx presentation](#) describes the two loop theory and the various roles each of us might play during these times.

In my own work as a grass roots organizer and advocate for redistricting reform, I am learning the power of *critical connections and the impact of creating fluid and dynamic structures across traditional boundaries*. As a member of the League of Women Voters of Indianapolis and a state advocate for redistricting reform, I knew that if we wanted this organization to increase its capacity to significantly make an impact on educating and advocating for redistricting reform, we couldn’t do it alone. We co-founded a state-wide coalition with Common Cause Indiana focusing on gerrymandering and its impact on our democracy. However, even as a statewide coalition of about seventeen other partners, we did not have the infrastructure for capacity grassroots organizing on a significant level.

November 8, 2016 changed everything. In response to the election results, Facebook groups sprang up all over the state, with a couple of significant groups around the Indianapolis area. They started with a few hundred ‘friends’ on a Facebook site, but have grown into the thousands since November. Their organizers attended some of our coalition rallies and legislative hearings, and asked for help in responding to the issue of gerrymandering and redistricting reform. Their followers were aching to ‘do something’ in response to the election. *The methods in which these new groups had organized and formed were very different than the structures we knew as LWV or Common Cause. They*

weren't an organization or a coalition, they were a virtual community poised for action. Their definition of membership was very different than ours, but they were eager to work with us on redistricting reform. I met with their key leaders. We attended their first *Facebook Events* and shared what we were doing as a coalition. We exchanged emails, phone numbers and Twitter accounts with their key organizers. We met for coffee and had lunch meetings. They invited us to join their Facebook group so we could post events and alerts. *(Many of the Facebook groups were private to limit trolls and monitor civility and focus)*. We agreed to work collaboratively together on certain topics and to continue to explore ways to be connected so we could make a difference in the issues we cared about. By February, our coalition was able to create a much broader reach in our efforts of redistricting reform. We now had the capacity to reach tens of thousands of Hoosiers across the state eager to be able to do something in response to what was going on in our country. *We are learning to be strategic and laser focused in how we connect with these groups, how to gather different stakeholders from across the state in order to create connections that provide much needed resources of time, talent and treasure.* We are using [June Holley's model](#) of networking for social impact and learning how to 'connect, align and produce' action at a local level to work against partisan and racial gerrymandering. We still have a lot to learn, but we are excited, motivated and making a lot of *good trouble* at the Statehouse and in local town hall meetings.

The work that I do as citizen and volunteer is deeply connected to the work that I do as consultant and facilitator for religious congregations. I have relied on Meg Wheatley's theory of two loop life cycle and her understanding of emergence for over five years now in my professional work. In my volunteer work, *I am living* what it looks like for those 'wayfinders' that she describes to come together in fluid and dynamic structures. Connecting across boundaries doesn't just happen. There are new ways of coming together for a common reason

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that doesn't rely on building institutions, organizations or even coalitions. Holley's understanding of network weaving and network mapping is a perfect corollary to Wheatley's scholarship on emerging systems. Networks for mission may emerge around the world if we learn the power of networking and are willing to experiment with new structures for community and mission.

Religious Institutes have emerged over the past 150 years, but are finding they can *no longer exist as they always have*. Few are denying the data concerning demographics. Properties are being divested, congregations are entering into covenant relationships, innovative ways for supporting the assisted and skilled care needs of their elderly sisters are being explored, and many smaller communities have decided to stop taking new vocations. However, the

mission and charism of these congregations are alive and well. Creative and passionate women within these congregations are aching to explore new and innovative ways in which to be in mission for these times. Building on the passion for mission, we are learning the importance of asking the right questions. Instead of asking, “How will the congregation survive the next 50 years?” we are beginning to ask “How can the Gospel mission continue to thrive even if Sisters are longer here?” The second question points us to ‘critical connections’ and looking outside traditional boundaries and stereotypes about who ‘owns’ mission. As communities explore ways in which others beyond vowed life might connect to the charism and mission of a congregation, a myriad of other questions arises, often concerning what it means to be vowed in these times. Some younger sisters are beginning to ask what it might look to be ‘liminal and prophetic’ and the implications that would have for community, mission and ministry.¹ Perhaps if we linger in these types of questions long enough, *we may discover emergent ways* to be in mission, to be prophetic, to live a life form that springs from the prophetic and mystical traditions in which religious life has emerged.

Communities invested in supporting the *future of mission* beyond the future of their *particular congregation* are engaging in conversations with alumnae, ministry partners, donors, family members and neighbors concerning spirituality, mission, charism, community and commitment. Younger sisters are connecting inter-congregationally and inter-culturally and exploring questions about community and mission as 21st century vowed women. Communities are learning about the possibility of creating ‘networks for mission’ that do not look like the institutions for mission of the past 150 years. In my work with congregations, we are exploring how to be ‘network weavers’ for mission and charism. We are learning to apply the insights coming from network weaving and network structures that support the things we deeply care about---peace, justice, creation, the Gospel call.

So, whether a community activist for redistricting reform or a senior consultant for CommunityWorks, Inc., I am certain that forming critical connections for mission in new and innovative ways is a prophetic response to the signs of the times.

¹ O’Murchu, Diarmuid. *Religious Life in the 21st Century*. Orbis Books 2016.

Resources:

On the following page we have included a simple one page handout that compares the two-loop cycle and the role of *wayfinders* to the concept of *network weaving*. The embedded links in the above article along with this handout may be useful tools for applying the concepts for two loop cycles and networks for social impact.

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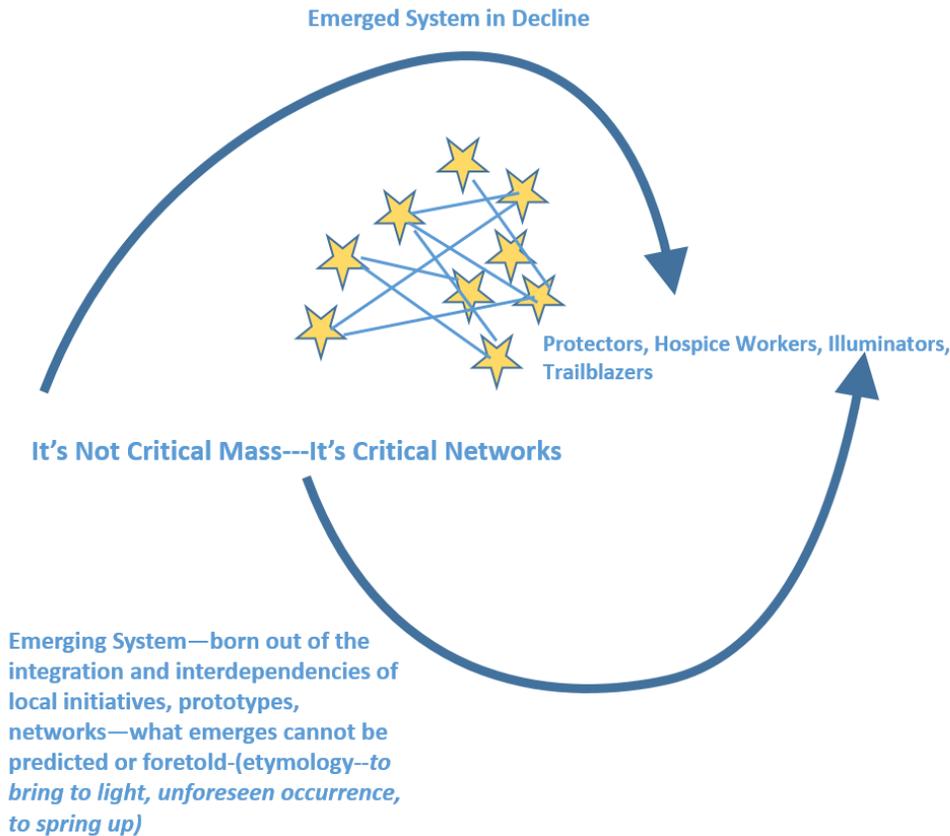
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Two Loop Cycle and Network Weaving



CREATING NETWORKS FOR SOCIAL IMPACT*

- ✓ **C-A-P---Connect, Align , Produce**
 - Create a robust and resilient core to weave the network
- ✓ **CONNECTING STAGE---**create bandwidth , share information, develop infrastructure for staying connected, determine initial value proposition, create resilient core
- ✓ **ALIGNING STAGE---**create processes for shared meaning, determine focus and accountability measures, further develop the core while remaining decentralized, further develop collective value propositions
- ✓ **PRODUCING STAGE---**members develop and implement projects based on alignments they have achieved, requires a 'champion' to coordinate the efforts, may need staff and resources, projects are porous and fluid
- ✓ **SHAPE-SHIFTING NETWORK STRUCTURES---**Hub and Spoke, Clusters, Multiple Hubs, Many Channels

(adapted from Connecting to Change the World. Peter Plastrik, Madeline Taylor, John Cleveland 2014 Island Press)

*Two loop Cycle based on Deborah Frieze and Margaret Wheatley's work.
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