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## **Collaboration Across Boundaries**

By Gibrán Rivera, Interaction Institute for Social Change

This paper serves as background for a keynote address to be offered at the annual NEEEA Conference on October 4, 2008

Our heightened awareness of the global environmental crisis invites us to understand the crucial place of environmental education as a response to that crisis. But as we set out to educate, we are faced with the same historical and seemingly insurmountable boundaries that have challenged the environmental movement for decades. The immediate and global nature of the problem demands that we transcend these boundaries of race, class, and location, as well as those of political affiliation and economic ideology. Where traditional coalition approaches and deal making have failed us in the past, it now becomes extremely important to re-imagine a framework for collaboration across boundaries, which might make possible the significant shift needed if we are to get ourselves out of this burning hole.

My own effort to re-imagine such a collaborative approach leads me to focus on two aspects of collaborative change. One of these is what I refer to as “location” or the precise place where change can happen. The other is the “approach,” or how we conceive of ourselves as interveners when coming into contact with the space we want to change.

### **Location – Life at the Intersection**

I will begin by considering location. My colleague, Curtis Ogden, often refers to “those spaces in-between,” – the places where our most exciting potentialities become manifest. These “spaces in-between” are actual places in our environmental landscape. They are those places where one ecosystem meets another. The coast is a most obvious example, but they are also those places where a desert is no longer a desert, a plain is no longer a plain, or the place where the tree-line becomes evident as you find yourself climbing the heights of a mountain.

According to Curtis, biological life in these spaces is both fascinating and powerfully resilient. These corners of the earth are particularly rich in that the life that is manifest there must by necessity embody significantly distinctive aspects of the ecosystems that abut it. This is life at the intersection, and the intersection is where innovation happens. In “The Medici Effect,” Frans Johansson argues that while a given field can work to advance itself, breakthrough innovation can only happen at the intersection of fields; it requires the combination of whole new sets of factors that would never have been found within any given field.

In considering “location” as a key aspect for re-imagining collaboration across boundaries, we want to consider what it means to work with communities and individuals who might live in social ecosystems that are significantly different from our own. We

want to build movement across boundaries because we intuitively understand that a global crisis demands a global solution.

As we seek to redefine the parameters of this next phase in movement building, many of us find ourselves looking for insights in the way living systems emerge, sustain, and adapt themselves to permanently changing circumstances. Margaret Wheatley and the Berkana Institute, who have pioneered the application of these ideas to the field of social change, have proposed that emergence happens when critical connections are made among previously disconnected experimental or evolutionary efforts. This realization resonates with both the Medici Effect and the formulation of life in those “spaces in-between.”

Reflecting on collaboration across boundaries, I have made it my first task to explore the location for this sort of collaboration by drawing a correlation among the principles of emergence, the Medici Effect, and life as it is manifest in those spaces in-between. It is my hope that you can begin to intuit how these three concepts might be connected to the work of collaboration across boundaries.

### **Approach – Reconnecting to Ourselves as Biological Life**

My proposition for collaboration across boundaries launches from a set of conclusions that stem from an emergent consensus about the state of social change movements in the United States. One might say that the very lens, the very models, that we use to observe, measure and be in the world are fast becoming obsolete. This is observable first and foremost through the evidence of a planet that has quite literally been set ablaze by a dominant but deficient idea of progress.

While the environmental crisis is the most “popular” indicator that something has gone terribly wrong, it is also important to account for two other global challenges to our existential imagination. We must account for the bloody horrors of global war, highlighted by the insanity of Iraq but further evidenced by Georgia, Afghanistan and the number of conflicts within the African continent. We must also account for the constantly growing gap between a diminutive number of the global rich and the staggering masses of the global poor. The crises of imbalanced immigration patterns and the continuing exploitation of at-risk environments in the developing world find root cause in this global income gap.

Our institutional arrangements, the core ways in which we have chosen to organize ourselves – as nation states, as economic systems, as spiritual communities and yes, even as agents of social intervention – are all solidly rooted in the very models that have brought our humanity this far while also falling dangerously short. What I’m saying – and this is central to my proposal for collaboration – is that our habitual way of doing business, our most established systems, the dominant paradigms are no longer fit for the job of helping us reinvent ourselves. I paraphrase Albert Einstein in saying that a problem cannot be solved at the same level of consciousness at which it was created.

The lens that has been “en vogue” since the West set off on its project of global domination four hundred years ago, grounds us in a scientific model that is still essentially Newtonian and representative of the industrial age during which it came to its fullness. This lens has been undermined as much by advancements in biology and physics as by social experience of the significant proportion of human beings who now inhabit the post-industrial age.

Our technology is characterized by a vast and universalizing decentralized infrastructure which is highlighted by the internet, but also reflected in other modes of communication as well as in the life of global financial systems. In the same way, our sciences have become more concerned with whole systems, adaptability, quantum potentiality and emergence. Spiritual movements making claims on all of the broadly observed traditions are also making space for more holistic approaches to their respective metaphysics. So what is special about this moment is that, while our institutional constraints lag dangerously behind, by virtue of working in the current world, the vast majority of us find ourselves inextricably connected to one aspect or another of the emergent paradigm.

To make this less abstract, and to bring together how all this might be connected to what I’m calling “approach” in collaboration across boundaries, we might take a look at our own approaches to environmentalism. We know that our embodied selves are unequivocally biological in nature. We might have all sorts of questions, propositions or beliefs about our spiritual nature, but the part of us that is most palpably at risk by the crisis of the environment is this biological manifestation of self. The amazing thing is that, while we know this, we find it very difficult to act from this understanding. Our institutional and educational arrangements are so biased towards abstraction and linear left-brain activity that we find ourselves dangerously disconnected from that significant part of us that is inherently and most evidently a part of the planet’s biological make up.

My argument for collaboration across boundaries depends first on inviting us to connect to ourselves as biological life, and to consider the possibility that even our thoughts are somehow part of this global ecosystem. It is necessary for me to make this proposition, because in looking at living systems, and at the adaptive patterns of biological life within the very planetary sphere that we ourselves inhabit, we can easily detect a tendency towards integration. Ecosystems thrive and are made whole where they find the space and time to evolve and integrate as necessary.

Here, then, it becomes useful to consider a sort of pulsation or evolutionary heartbeat that breathes outward towards diversity and breathes inwards towards integration. I go through the effort of calling forth our biological nature with the hope of helping us shift out of a paradigm that is so industrial and mechanistic that it has successfully separated us from the very sphere in which we are constituted. By looking at ourselves as part of a living planetary system, we can pay more attention to our own neglected tendency towards integration. We can begin to believe this tendency is itself part of the earth’s effort to heal, an inherent mechanism of biological life.

We then immediately move to operationalize the concept with the very left-brain capacities that bias us towards the obsolete institutional arrangements that continue to fail us. Recognize that we actually carry within our own biological makeup a capacity to integrate, which has made life thrive on the planet through the millennia that preceded the industrial age, and to hold onto this realization long enough for a whole new set of possibilities to become conceivable.

This proposal for collaboration across boundaries is grounded within this set of possibilities. It is a proposal that calls forth our own alignment with the tendency towards integration inherent in our nature. In dire circumstances we are toying with the real possibility that our thoughts might not be completely separate from our biology. We are accounting for the fact that our thoughts are manifest through a set of biological mechanisms that are themselves unquestionably part of nature.

We have already established that we are living under dire circumstances. We have proposed that the institutional arrangements that are most obviously available to us are actually obsolete and, therefore, lacking in their capacity to bring about the necessary change. And we have also proposed that by looking at ourselves as part of nature, rather than outside of it, we might be able to see ourselves within an evolutionary pattern that breathes out diversification while breathing in integration. So how is any of this related to collaboration across boundaries?

Let us consider a simple, yet too often insurmountable, boundary. We can consider an environmental movement that is steeped in a history of privilege and often associated with the white, middle-class, liberal establishment. Generally speaking, this movement has struggled to connect with an urban reality that is too often removed from a more direct experience of nature, that tends to represent greater racial, ethnic and class diversity, and that can be more immediately concerned with environmental justice. The layers of social history embedded in this boundary are too deep to undo with the linear, incremental and increasingly obsolete model that is most easily available to us. The global emergency that we face, the immediate suffering being experienced, and the potential for the sort of suffering that is exponentially greater than any we have witnessed thus far, is a reality that demands approaches that can exponentially move to shift whole social ecosystems.

The layers of history, the lack of trust and high levels of justifiable resentment demand an approach that is grounded in radical authenticity. The type of authenticity that is demanded for cross-boundary collaboration to be possible is defined by the practice of true inquiry. True inquiry, or authentic inquiry, is the opposite of rhetorical inquiry; authentic inquiry is an inquiry that does not in any way pretend to know the answer. Authentic inquiry demands that the inquirer be open to change, to shift in their understanding of the situation by the very process of opening up the conversation.

See, when a social change agent, in this case the environmentalist who is grounded in an industrial paradigm, enters a conversation with a community that exists in a different social ecosystem, he actually enters with the belief that there is some sort of findable

magic lever that will allow him to influence the behavior of that ecosystem while somehow operating from outside of that system. These are the efforts that have proved futile.

Authentic inquiry makes space for authentic relationships, and authentic relationships make transformative collaboration possible. The collaboration that operates outside of this sort of authenticity may at times serve to move systems, but not to transform them. Collaboration across boundaries becomes possible through authentic relationships, and authentic relationships live and thrive through authentic inquiry, the sort of inquiry that makes room for all parties to change. It is easy to speak about authentic relationships in idealized terms, but the truth is it takes an unbelievable amount of courage to engage in the sort of inquiry that makes authentic relationships possible.

We will be habitually tempted to rely on the industrial lens that has shaped our institutional arrangements, and this obsolete lens will inevitably fail us and our purpose while at the same time giving our organizational structures too much room to replicate themselves as they are. The courage to engage in the authentic inquiry that is required for authentic relationships to become possible can only be found if we look for it within the biological aspects of our nature that are already an integral part of the planetary system for self-preservation. We must seize upon our own tendency to integrate while truly believing that this tendency is shared by those human beings that might exist on the other side of a socio-political boundary but unquestionably also exist within the biological frameworks of the planet.

Given the possible change in our “approach,” we still face as resilient a boundary as there is when we seek to collaborate across the social experiences of race, class and place in America. We also face a seemingly insurmountable boundary when we dare to think about collaboration between “us” as environmentally conscious individuals and those we might see as our political enemy, those whose economic interests might be found in the unsustainable exploitation of our environment. So where might we find the spaces where these connections can become possible?

### **Integrating Location and Approach with Boundary Crossers**

This is where we finally come back to the “spaces in-between” that Curtis and I like to talk about. Along the edges of these boundaries we will be able to find the variety of human species that can somehow navigate both worlds. If we look with care, intentionally diminishing the power of our habitual lenses, we will find those individuals that can navigate urban life and privileged environmentalism; we will find those individuals that can navigate environmental righteousness and entrenched economic interests. These are the individuals who can broker the space for authentic conversation, authentic inquiry and authentic relationships.

Collaboration across boundaries is not just a matter of bringing two sides together. It requires that the right stakeholders be connected to each other. These right stakeholders are a very special and even rare sort. They are the individuals whose life circumstances

have made them boundary-crossers. They are the ones that inhabit those spaces in-between and the ones that we must engage if we are to succeed in this sort of collaboration.

It doesn't stop here. Faced with dire circumstances, and an emergency situation, the nature of our inquiry demands that we accept that we do not have all the answers. This is particularly challenging for a movement of educators, which has relied so heavily on science. But here, too, we might want to switch our lens. The obsolete lens of the industrial age is rooted in a Newtonian science that has too often been driven by a search for conclusive finality. But the science of our day is a science aligned with the best and deepest history of true science, a science that is itself grounded in authentic inquiry.

Once we recognize that the answers we do have are but a part of the full answer, we start to see the benefits of the Medici Effect. It suddenly becomes our prerogative to bring together individuals from a diversity of fields and experiences, and thus create an intersection from which truly innovative answers might emerge. In this Medici world, information becomes a different sort of currency. It is no longer a currency to be hoarded and protected, but a currency that is overabundant and demands to be widely shared.

It is here, as we seek to foster such an innovative intersection, that we might also apply what we are learning about emergence from groups like the Berkana Institute. The laws of emergence invite us to focus our energy on making the critical connections among the cross-boundary individuals that here become the most fertile ground for new possibilities. And new possibilities are what will allow us to shift out of the level of consciousness where we have created our problem.

In considering our relationship to "the enemy," which is significantly different from the relationship between the environmental movement as a whole and urban environmentalism, we might want to take on a systems lens. By looking at a system as a whole, we can see "the enemy" itself as an abstract structure that is sustained by the power of an obsolete lens. Focusing on structure as the problem frees us to consider our biological tendency towards integration, and, in this way, see the individuals operating within this "enemy" system as having the inherent human potential to engage in the sort of authentic inquiry that leads to authentic relationships. In authentic conversations with individuals who exist within an "enemy system," we might open ourselves to finding aspects of that system that might actually be useful in redefining our relationship to the planet.

It is important to note that it is possible to have a civil exchange with "the enemy," to identify common ground and to reach clever compromises by using a lot of the tools and frameworks that are most readily accessible. However, we can only make room for the necessary evolutionary shift by entering into authentic conversations with the human beings that make up that system, and by getting to know them in ways that transcend the institutional constraints that might have made our conversations possible in the first place.

## Conclusion

The exciting thing about all this is that so much is already happening. These types of conversations are happening in small spaces scattered throughout the planet. Current technology is allowing for critical connections to be made among the many groups having these conversations. Those of us paying attention can begin to perceive an emergent global zeitgeist that allows for this very space, in which we ourselves are having this conversation. As exciting for me is the opportunity to work with the Interaction Institute for Social Change and our growing network of peers and allies who are concerning ourselves with fostering, hosting and designing the creative spaces of intersection where these conversations can take place. It is an incredible privilege to be connected to a network of people who are passionately committed to figuring out what it takes to be a midwife to the new world that is trying to emerge. By creating spaces where people from very different ecosystems can be held as they come together to invent, innovate and make room for emergence, we are able to facilitate collaboration across boundaries and make room for the necessary shift that will get us out of the burning hole we have dug for ourselves.