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for Social Change

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Shifting Tides: Leadership for the Sea Change Ahead

Keynote Address:
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Welcome/Thank You

I want to thank all of you for the opportunity to be here today. It is a privilege to be in the midst of kindred spirits such as yourselves. I often say to my staff that I feel we have a very skewed view of the world, because we are constantly finding ourselves surrounded by inspired and motivated change agents who have committed their lives to making the world a better place and are stepping into their leadership in a most profound way. And so, on behalf of all of my colleagues at IISC, thank you not just for being here, but for doing the good and important work you are doing!

Framing

In the fall of 2003, after ten years at the helm of the Interaction Institute, I was given the opportunity to take a four-month sabbatical. I went into this experience deeply troubled about the historical moment in which we were living, knowing that it was calling for a radical shift in thinking and approach. I was facing up to the fact that the last decade of leadership and organizational development in our sector was not adding up to significant, systemic impact and I sensed that something else was missing in our sector at a deeper more life-giving place. I was challenged as a social change agent to dig deep and attempt to discern right thinking and right action and blessedly I had been given the gift of time to take a step back.

On the first Friday of my sabbatical, I had decided on a whim to go to an afternoon movie in Harvard Square. After parking my car I saw that there were secret service agents swarming outside of the Charles Hotel. I asked one of them who was in town, expecting to hear that another political figure was visiting the Kennedy School next door. But she said the Dalai Lama is upstairs, at which point I stood sentry at the entrance of the hotel with about ten other folks and waited. About an hour later the Dalai Lama came out surrounded by the secret service whisking him to his car. I yelled out Namaste...he looked up and came right over and grabbed my two hands as all of the other folks surrounded him in a circle in what must have looked like giddy teenagers in a group hug. We were all laughing, smiling, bowing and hugging.

Of course, 2003 was significant in so many other ways: in March of that year the United States invaded Iraq; in February ten million people from across the globe protested against that invasion; in May more tornadoes were reported in one week (393) than at any other time in U.S. history and in August of that year countries in Europe reached the highest temperatures ever recorded in their history. In the post 9-11 world we were waking up to the promise and perils of globalization: the interdependence of nations and regions **and** the truly global, systemic nature of our problems neither of which had ever existed before. Author Duane Elgin put it this way. There are adversity trends in our world like climate change and world poverty that are driving us towards an evolutionary crash. And there are opportunity trends like our understanding through quantum physics that all of life is deeply connected and the global communications revolution that are driving us toward an evolutionary bounce. I wondered what it meant to be alive at a time of such great transition and choice. What will it take for us to ensure the evolutionary bounce?

During this time I read... a lot. I was deeply influenced by all of the new thinking on emergence and network theory as applied to social change from Malcolm Gladwell's *Tipping Point* to Laszlo-Barabasi's: *Linked – How Everything is Connected to Everything Else*. I was learning that real networks are far from random and can have potentially far more impact than an organizationally driven set of outcomes. I began to see, though just barely, that there is a whole new way of thinking about group action and social impact and that the implications for our sector and for our work at IISC were yet to be understood.

A big part of my sabbatical also included attending classes at the Museum School at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts. I went to the Museum School to immerse myself in a world completely different than the one that I usually inhabited and to be surrounded by creativity. And, I was! Three nights a week, I walked into a large room chock a block with all kinds of materials: glue guns, fabric, wire, paint, recycled materials, 20 other students, and our teachers. We would have a short discussion about the medium that we would be using and about the topic that we might be exploring through that medium, and we would be given our assignment. What I learned from that experience was so important and has influenced me so deeply ever since... what I learned is that every day we are a beginner, we face a blank canvas, we are given a variety of materials and are expected to create something. It is our choice every day if we seek to create something beautiful. We are, all of us, designers.

Probably the most important thing I gained from my time on sabbatical was a re-membering. I began my work in social justice as one of the very first VISTA volunteers – a card carrying member of the War on Poverty. But, truth be told, it really began at Saint Agatha's School collecting money for the poor children in Africa, learning from the nuns and our parents that we are all God's children. I gained a more sophisticated theological understanding of the social gospel and its demands through the civil rights movement and later as an active participant in the Catholic left anti-war movement. Over the years, my own theology has expanded to include the ancient wisdom traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism and other eastern influences. This time of reflection, the final gift of the sabbatical was to re-member, to learn again the meaning and power in the truth articulated by Martin Luther King that, "Love is mankind's most potent weapon for personal and social transformation."

I came back to IISC and shared my sabbatical reflections and learnings and really big questions. I was certain about only one thing. I was certain that we needed first to identify and then to break through whatever it is that is holding us back from being our best and boldest selves: individually and organizationally. To acknowledge that we neither have the luxury nor the time to let fear, ignorance, ego, inertia or any number of things keep us from contributing to the evolutionary bounce.

This is a picture of Chuck Yeager with his plane Glamorous Glennis on the day he was to fly this plane in an attempt to break the sound barrier. Plenty of pilots had gotten close but it was thought that as you approach the sound barrier the force is so great and the shaking of the plane so unbearable that you instinctively take your foot off the gas and then plummet. The Mach meter on the plane Chuck Yeager was flying didn't even go past 1.0, and every PhD standing on the ground watching was convinced Yeager would die trying. But when he got up there, in the moment of truth, rather than take his foot off the gas like so many before him, he hit the gas. The Mach meter hovered at .96 for a second and then he just shot through it.

Everything worthwhile requires a facing down of your fear. And if you go towards it, if you blast through it, the universe seems to know when you are up to something so bold and daring that it surrounds you in protective beauty. This is a picture of what it looks like, when a plane breaks the sound barrier...

So, answers to this question. "What is the leadership needed for the sea-change ahead?" have been coalescing for me and for us at IISC, in the wake of my sabbatical and the last 15 years of our work and are rooted in three core ideas:

- a new more collective definition of leadership;
- networks not organizations are the "unit of action" in the 21st century; and
- in the words of Cornel West, "justice is what love looks like in public."

And, these are the ideas I will be exploring with you in our time together today.

A New More Collective Definition of Leadership

Erich Jarvis is a forty-something neurobiologist who was raised in New York City, attended the School for the Performing Arts (where he was an accomplished dancer), and went on to become impassioned about bird brains as a student at Hunter College and Rockefeller University. Now a professor at Duke, his research on bird behavior has suggested that birds are much more intelligent than we had previously thought. For example, hummingbirds, it turns out, can teach other hummingbirds to sing and crows are able to fashion tools with their beaks to obtain hard-to-reach food. Jarvis has been studying the complexity and intelligence behind bird songs and calls, with hope that his work will lead to therapies for human beings with speech problems.

Many scientists have objected to the very notion that birds are more intelligent, in part because the terminology used to describe a bird's brain had long emphasized its primitiveness. Jarvis set out to change this, and he did it in a very uncharacteristic manner for most research scientists.

He pulled together colleagues from around the country and across disciplines to undertake the daunting task of collaboratively renaming the component parts of the avian brain. No small project, the process involved considerable bumps along the way with clashing egos and worldviews. But ever the artful choreographer, Jarvis stepped back, listened, gave input at strategic moments, and masterfully facilitated a complex process that yielded shared agreement and a jointly published paper on new names for the avian brain. This work not only contributed to the emerging understanding of bird intelligence; it has paved the way for more serious research that may help us to better understand ourselves. Jarvis goes on to say:

“My career has been based on a collaborative way of doing things because it comes naturally for me. This goes back to my upbringing. . . . But it doesn't mean that it's natural in the field of science. That being said, in science breakthroughs often happen when different fields are combined. The discovery of DNA happened because physicists brought their technology and their ideas to biology. They brought an old question to a new field. I think the same thing happens culturally. You have people from different cultural backgrounds coming together, and they bring their cultural thinking in ways that haven't been combined before.”

Erich Jarvis is the perfect example of what we at the Interaction Institute refer to as a *facilitative leader*, and what we believe is the face of leadership in our sector going forward.

Facilitative Leadership starts, ironically, with the notion that we must radically change our perception and thinking about leaders and leadership, itself. Originally based in a Newtonian, mechanistic understanding of how the world works, our ideas about leadership have evolved over the last fifty years. We've gone from a heroic, command and control approach to a more participative, collaborative approach that involved teams, less hierarchy, and a much higher level of engagement and input, to now -- a time when our understanding of the world is informed by quantum physics and complexity theory...a world described by Tom Freidman as flat, where all of knowledge, not to mention finances, has been connected and democratized. We are defining and understanding leadership at a time when our systems breakdowns and global crisis demands that we create a future that is so radically different from the past

Several thought leaders with whom we are familiar have themselves been struggling with this concept: Peter Senge in his new book *The Necessary Revolution* introduces us to the idea of the *animateur*, the French word for people who seek to create systemic change. He says that an animateur is someone who brings to life a new way of thinking, seeing or interacting that creates focus and energy.” And, in Peter Block's new book, *Community - The Structure of Belonging*, he renames leaders as “social architects” defined by their ability to set intention, convene, value relatedness, and present choices. The animateur and the social architect seem to be getting us closer to the kind of leadership we need for *these* times.

Last month an article appeared in the New York Times analyzing the first presidential debate where the writer is quoted as saying: *“Mr. McCain, who came of age in a chain-of-command culture, showed once again that he believes that individual leaders can play a catalytic role and should use the bully pulpit to push politicians. Mr. Obama, who came of age as a community organizer, showed once again that he believes several minds are better than one, and that, for all of his oratorical skill, he is wary of too much showmanship.”*

As we embrace leadership as being first and foremost about shared responsibility, as a leveraging and unleashing of much needed collective intelligence and commitment, we see in fact that *the central task* of leadership today is to create the conditions for others to flourish and to thrive, to step into their own power. We see that the roles that leaders play in **these** times are more aptly described as catalysts, champions, connectors. We see that these leaders are strategic, collaborative, and flexible and they are most often rooted in real authenticity, service, and love.

We are daunted in our sector by the demographic reality of baby boomer leaders exiting in the next five to ten years, leaving a massive leadership gap. I am wondering if this conversation – while important and real – may also be taking us off course or at least maybe taking up too much of our time.

I believe, particularly in these most troubled times, that we are being called to boldly invest in networked, boundary-crossing social architects....multi-cultural, multi-generational social architects. We need to build their capacity in collaboration, design, facilitation, network building and the uses of new social media in service of real change. It is our **collective** capacity that will lead us into a future that is so very different from the past.

Networks as the “unit of action” in the 21st Century

What do Lehman Brothers, AIG, The Codman Square Neighborhood Health Center and a portfolio of Ford Foundation global civil society grantees have in common??

They are all hubs of densely connected networks. They have discovered that their success no longer depends solely on achieving their organizational goals, they are no longer focused solely on managing people and programs, their organizational boundaries are no longer rigid and impenetrable. They and we are all experiencing a fundamental shift in our sector from issue-based nonprofit organizations and program-focused foundations as the vehicles and language of our times to networks as the way to achieve social impact in the 21st century.

This shift is in fact becoming a movement. A movement that is happening in response to our systemic problems, a movement, that is truly global. In country after country, people are coming together in new ways, making their voices heard and taking collective action. Paul Hawkins in his book *Blessed Unrest* attempts to document how the largest humanitarian movement in the history of the world is coming into being. A movement of movements that is unified by ideas not ideologies...with activities that go unreported by the media and with impact has yet to be fully realized.

Recently I was working with one of my favorite Ford Program officers helping to design a meeting of her global civil society grantees. The purpose of the meeting was to share the findings of a recently completed evaluation of her eight years of grantmaking; grantmaking in the field of strengthening the networks and movements through which people exercise citizenship around the world. What was so interesting was to go back to through those eight years to the year 2000 and to remember the frame through which she and her colleagues were looking. It was shortly after

the Battle of Seattle (the original free market protest) when there was a growing awareness that something that might even be called global civil society was beginning to emerge.

This evaluation was looking at the outcomes of the overarching strategies of connecting, nurturing and building the capacity of this barely emerging field that guided her grantmaking. What was so very inspiring to me were the meta-outcomes that were being articulated. Over these eight years, the eight years that some in our country may be calling among the darkest, this movement of movements, this “blessed unrest,” was being woven together across the world.

Among the meta-outcomes identified by the evaluation, these three stand out:

- global civil society has become a more recognized – if still heavily contested – discourse in world politics
- global networks of civil society organizations have widened and deepened
- civil society organizations have obtained greater capacities to promote a democratization of global affairs

Another more locally-based example that illuminates this cross boundary network approach is a story about the Davis Foundation in Springfield, Massachusetts. For three decades, the Foundation had given hundreds of grants to cultural, educational, and human service organizations, in support of Springfield’s families. However, data from one of the poorest cities in Massachusetts showed little promise for many of its most at-risk residents.

In view of this situation, Executive Director Mary Walachy and the Davis Foundation’s trustees asked the question, “What else might we do to improve the well-being of children in Springfield?” and they began to explore other options.

The Davis Foundation engaged us at IISC to help it step into a new role, convening the local community to devise strategies and build momentum in support of its youngest children. IISC partnered with the Foundation and community members to co-design and facilitate a community-wide collaborative planning process, called Cherish Every Child, that gathered input from hundreds of stakeholders, including nonprofit and business leaders, elected officials, public school personnel, and local residents.

The yearlong planning process yielded a shared community vision and “blueprint for action.” Five years into implementation, with a densely woven network of activists working together, Cherish Every Child continues to be noted for its successes.

In the words of Mary Walachy, “While the final product of the early work was the development of a comprehensive ‘blueprint’ for our children, the process of achieving this plan was as important as the product itself.”

I believe this is because of what we are learning in the Connected Age – that it is not simply the blueprints, the tactics, and the strategies that produce change and impact; it is the network of relationships that share a vision and set of beliefs.

In each of these examples you can see the critical role played by the foundation. In each instance, the foundation understood the difference between a “funder-driven” initiative and the opportunity to step into its positive power to convene a diverse set of stakeholders, to create the conditions, to support and nourish the network and to build real partnerships with its grantees. And, in each of these examples, you can see, the capacity of the nonprofit organizations to transcend their organizational self-interests in order to collaborate, connect and take concerted action. To achieve together what is impossible to achieve separately.

Recently at IISC, we were introduced to a very useful framework developed by David Snowden called the Cynefin Framework that further explicates the need for collaboration among multiple stakeholders and a network approach. Cynefin is a Welsh word that refers to the multiplicity of factors in our environment that we simply cannot know.

DISORDER	ORDER
Complex	Complicated
Chaos	Simple

Many organizational issues are complicated – that is, they can be broken down into their component parts and can be solved by experts or technical fixes. And, on the other hand, many organizational issues such as strategy and policy are more complex and need to be tackled by many heads and many hands. However, all of the social issues with which we engage in our sector – from climate change, HIV/Aids and global poverty to education, public health and social services – reside squarely in the complexity box where there is a great distance between cause and effect.

Some of you may be familiar with a well-read essay written by Ron Heifetz for the Stanford Social Innovation Review titled “Leading Boldly.” In it he describes these complex issues as adaptive problems – problems that are not well defined, the answers are not known in advance, and many different stakeholders are involved, each with their own perspective. “Adaptive problems,” he says, “require innovation and learning among the interested parties and even when a solution is discovered no single entity has the authority to impose it on others. The stakeholders themselves must create and put the solutions into effect.....”

The idea of designing processes that appropriately involve stakeholders in collaborative efforts to both identify problems and create solutions is not new. In fact, it has been the backbone of IISC’s work in the world for many years. What is new are the tools that are available to us. As Clay Shirky writes in *Here Comes Everybody, The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*, “Most of the barriers to group action have collapsed and without those barriers we are free to explore new ways of gathering together and getting things done.” To paraphrase him further: we can do old things in new ways and new things we’ve never even thought of before.

As the 20th century free market and public systems disintegrate, as funding for our services go down while the demand for them simultaneously goes up, the social sector has no choice but to respond with 21st century thinking and tools. It is up to each and every one of us to leave behind

our out-dated approaches. It is now imperative that we break out of our issue, program and geographic silos to connect with others and ensure cross-boundary innovation. And you know what? We need to invest. We need to invest in R&D and prototype new approaches. We need to really understand how to apply network theory to social change. We need to develop more collaborative tools and large group methods and more Web 2.0 platforms to make complex adaptive systems work. We need to experiment with new organizational structures that are flat, networked and are moving power to the edges.

Finally, we need to see. We need to see that we are all a part of the unnamed movement described by Paul Hawken – a movement that is not burdened with the syndrome of trying to save the world because **it** is trying to remake the world. We need to see, again in his words, that we will prevail, not defeat or conquer, but rather the thinking that informs the movement’s vision – to create a just society conducive to life on earth – will reign.

“Justice is what love looks like in public.” -Cornel West

I am coming to believe that the greatest barrier to enacting large scale and high impact social change really does stem in large part from our inability to experience ourselves as connected rather than separate from and different than others. Love, as Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, is the “supreme unifying principle of life.” Of course, he also reminded us that while “power without love is reckless and abusive, love without power is sentimental and anemic.”

There are a few lenses through which we can look at this idea of “the love that does justice.” the first somewhat rational approach is articulated by Michael Edwards, former Director of the Ford Foundation’s Governance and Civil Society Program and author of the recently released *The Love That Does Justice: Spiritual Activism Meets in Dialogue with Social Service*. In a speech by the same title given a few years ago, Mike, who is a trained social scientist and twenty-something year veteran in the field of international development, claimed that, “the future of the world depends on how successful we are in developing and applying a new social science of love,” which he calls a radically-different form of rationality, a rationality of “love into action.”

From Mike’s perspective, it is the absence of this critical element, this love ethic and orientation in work for peace and social justice, that often results in the failure to build the alliances and collective wisdom that could lead to significant and sustainable social change.

I once heard Paul Farmer, Founder of Partners in Health and subject of the extraordinary book, *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, describe it in another way. He said there is charity – which is I am rich and you are poor; I want to give to you and alleviate your suffering. There is equity – which is I have had opportunities and access enabling me to succeed; I want to level the playing field so that you have opportunity, access and can also succeed. And then there is solidarity – which is if you are poor, I am poor; we are in this together

Someone pointed out to me recently that two thirds of the world really does live from the heart. And I remembered when in Zimbabwe a couple of years ago being struck by the morning

greeting of the Shona, which is: did you sleep well? And the answer is always: I slept well if you slept well. It was on that same trip that I was also introduced to the Zulu concept of Ubuntu: I am because of you.

Buddhism teaches us that if you open your heart to the rest of the world you will feel tremendous sadness and it is this experience of the sad and tender heart that gives birth to fearlessness and bravery. And so it is that we as social change agents must attend to our interior condition to keep our hearts open, to be brave and fearless so that we can be in solidarity, so that we can connect.

Closing

I want to pick up the thread of the IISC story five years later and to share with you what I am finding most perplexing and provoking as we move forward.

In the 18 months following my return from sabbatical, IISC engaged in an extremely rigorous strategic planning process, guided by our sound barrier metaphor.

We set a ten year visionary goal that we would have a profound and radical impact on *how* change happens across the world. We determined that we simply could not achieve our visionary goal without considerable investment in our infrastructure and that we would need to triple in size. We developed a growth strategy and a business plan and I was tasked with securing the investment in our growth.

We reached a turning point in this trajectory at our staff meeting in December 2007. Something took place that was qualitatively different than other such end of year gatherings, all of which in the past had been characterized by a similar sense of exhaustion and feeling of accomplishment. There was a deep consensus in that room that we had a problem – that we were working too hard and for way too many hours a week and it was simply unsustainable. We did some root cause analysis to the problem and determined the technical fixes that we could move on immediately or plan to address over time. But we were tapping into something deeper, more fundamental. Our younger staff members challenged the old-timers and our approach to the work and seeming imbalance in our lives. They made it clear that they neither found it admirable nor were willing to emulate it. We knew that we had to take a step back and to look at our own culture...the one that we had created.

We sought out help and found Robert Gass, an extraordinary consultant and guide, and spent three days on retreat with him. While I would love to share the journey of those three days that brought us to our “eureka moment,” time won’t allow for that. I do, though, want to describe what was a true moment of collective awakening. We came to the realization that we had gotten caught up into what I have been calling the “scaling up madness.” We actually believed that our impact and our future depended on this growth strategy and that we needed to drive toward that goal. We were holding onto a set of beliefs that were not serving us as a community and were in fact contrary to our own authenticity. We were caught up in old organizationally-focused thinking rather than understanding ourselves as part of a web of capacity-builders committed to social transformation. We made the choice in that room to “be the change” by exponentially

increasing our impact through partnering with other organizations and to work more consciously and lovingly. We made a choice to build our work on a new set of values – the values of balance, well-being and sustainability.

That retreat was in March; we are struggling mightily to understand what it means to live and work from these values. We are so far from where we want to be but we are engaged and learning our way.

We realize that in our culture, in our sector, this could be a truly revolutionary, counter-cultural act and perhaps in its way the greatest contribution we could make to social transformation.

This summer I came across an essay written by Jess Maceo-Vega-Frey an activist who works with Stone Circles, in which I read a most provocative paragraph:

“Progressives are quick to point out and criticize the frightening patterns of over-consumption we are engaged in as a culture, but rarely address the corollary---the blind belief in the value of productivity. We are unable to acknowledge even the possibility that our lack of synchronicity with nature, our inhumane ways of being in the world and our unhappiness are a direct result of our obsession with productivity and action, as much as they are of our addiction to consumption....reclaiming our humanity is the truly revolutionary act.”

So it is this that has me perplexed: Are we being called to reverse the polarities in our world? Are we being called to know deeply that silence and play may be the source of innovation; that deep listening and empathy, not strategies and tactics, may be what produces right action; that simple acts of love and kindness may be the true levers of social transformation?

There is a Buddhist practice called tonglen, which is a most profound example of reversing the polarities and practicing solidarity in the deepest sense of the word. In Tibetan, tong means “sending out” and len means “receiving” or “accepting.” The practice of tonglen is straightforward; it is a sitting meditation practice where you breathe out your happiness and pleasure and breathe in problems and the suffering of others. It is a complete reversal in the logic of our everyday lives where we are desperately trying to take in the good for ourselves and our families and protect ourselves at all costs from the bad, from suffering. It is said in tonglen practice that the “more negativity we take in with a sense of openness and compassion the more goodness there is to breathe out on the other side, and that what usually happens is that you become a gentle person.”

So, I will leave you with that which is confounding me most because I believe as the poet Rilke has written:

“Live your questions now, and perhaps even without knowing it, you will live along some distant day into your answers.”