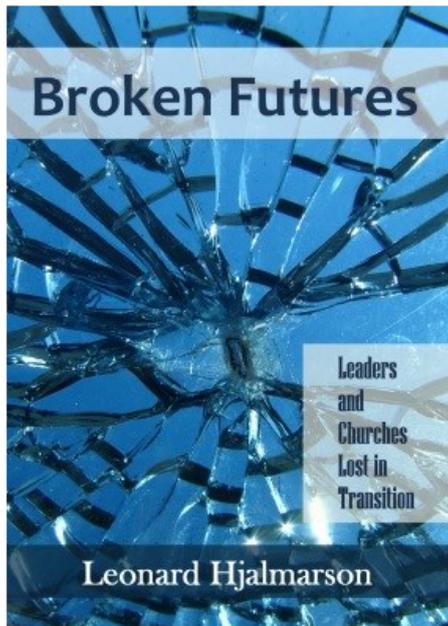


# Broken Futures

*Leaders and Churches  
Lost in Transition*







## Abstract

Our organizations are failing; as leaders we're struggling. Nothing seems reliable anymore. How do we respond to adaptive challenges? Why do we feel so lost?

The Franklin expedition was a non-adaptive response and contrasts with Jesus' sending the disciples out on mission – vulnerable and with nothing. How do we get comfortable with vulnerability? Living on the edge is a journey into experimentation and adaptation. It requires new capacities and skills from leaders and teams. I examine the experience of getting lost. Who survives and why? How do our mental maps limit us? How do we get unlost?

Iceland's Silfra fissure is formed by the pulling apart of tectonic plates. Modernity has fragmented and broken into post-modernity. Rather than manage the crisis, we find a way to withdraw and reflect, opening space. Our paradigms of progress are oppressive. Jesus told us that we would lose our lives to find them. We move down to rise up.

Living on edges creates tension, and tension generates wakefulness. In nature phase transition occurs suddenly, without warning. The old assumptions about growth and leadership no longer apply. Our landscape has gone from solid to liquid. When we can no longer read maps, we train navigators. We work with tools and practices that help us "read" the landscape.

Change is a constant condition, and local knowledge has become paramount. Innovators start before they are ready and develop prototypes to test new conditions. New leadership types are appearing: poets and synergists and boundary-crossers. Listening and observing together we invite a new future. The need for a community of leaders. I describe organizations that experimented into a new future.

Goal-posts have shifted and the field has become fluid. I offer a framework for understanding organizational culture and examine the

role of leaders in emergent conditions. In self-organizing systems leaders disrupt existing patterns, encourage novelty and act as sensemakers. Leadership is less about decisive action and more about shaping environments. I consider the importance of wide participation in learning organizations.

Pilgrimage begins when we discover a yearning for something more. The final phase is arrival at the beginning and “knowing the place for the first time.” The metaphor of exile fits the experience of leadership in our time; there is no going home, but God is with us. What feels like a trap might be a womb: a place of transformation and rebirth. The One on the throne says, “Behold! I make all things new!”



*“Courage is the ability to cultivate a relationship with the unknown;  
to create a form of friendship with what lies around  
the corner over the horizon –  
with those things that have not yet fully come into being...”*

David Whyte

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## Foreword

Yesterday I stood in a new doorway – one I created with a hammer and a crow-bar. I first had to expose the ancient plaster and lathe on the interior wall of our 100 year old home, and then the work began. It was messy. My right hand was beginning to ache. I was occasionally choking on dust, and it was irritating my eyes. After an hour of work I had created a path that will be used by a generation I will never know.

The shrinking population of our churches, and the corresponding anxiety of church leaders aren't the only reasons I am writing this book. In fact, this was not the book I had intended to write. But like many good projects, the project we conceive, and the project that wants to be done are not always the same thing. As our First Nations friends like to point out, "the path is made by walking."

If you intend to tread a less worn way, it's important to have wise companions. In this work I offer one of the best companions I know: TS Eliot. Each chapter leads off with a quotation from *The Four Quartets*. Eliot shines the wisdom of the ages on the process of transition. In doing so, he normalizes the uncertainty, the paradox, and the process of endings and beginnings. In some ways this book would not have been possible without his insight.

This book invites you on a journey. I know, you've read that before. But if you race through it in a day or two, it won't yield much benefit. Take your time: consider each chapter. Bring your life and work to the text. Read contemplatively, and let the words of TS Eliot wash over you. The violence of Modernity is speed. "The space for imagination to expand is inversely proportional to the speed at which we live." Eliot's poetry invites you into an open space; heed the call.

*Broken Futures* is a title and a work that embodies a paradox: in the end is our beginning. May you find hope, and wisdom, as you work through these pages.

*We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.*

T.S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," V

## Introduction

We don't need the Pew Survey or the Barna Group latest report to tell us that we have a problem. Christian leaders are well aware of the exodus from church. Studies like that of Alan Jamieson in New Zealand and Dave Kinnaman<sup>1</sup> in the USA have unveiled some of the implications of the transition we are in. While some of the mainline churches are in a kind of renewal<sup>2</sup>, evangelical churches in Canada and the USA are shrinking.

While the church has always been in crisis,<sup>3</sup> uncertainty and transition mark our times. We live amidst the collision of cultures and of worldviews, and the collapse of the Enlightenment synthesis. Rapid and unpredictable changes generate anxiety within us and stress within the organizations we lead. Individuals, institutions and whole communities are in transition. Reggie McNeal uses the metaphor of a violent river to describe the tension. He writes that,

Culture roils and churns in the collision of the old with the new. At the dawn of the third Christian millennium, continuity battles with discontinuity; the emergent dances with what is passing away. Leaders of spiritual enterprises, like many of the adherents of the faith, have oars in both currents. The challenge involves getting as many through the rapids as possible, knowing some will never make it.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith* (2005) and Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 2011. See also Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith* (2007) and Packard, *Church Refugees* (2015).

<sup>2</sup> Witness the stories of Diana Butler-Bass in *Christianity for the Rest of Us* (HarperCollins, 2006)

<sup>3</sup> I recall David Bosch words, "Strictly speaking one ought to say that the church is always in a state of crisis and that its greatest shortcoming is that it is only occasionally aware of it..." *Transforming Mission*, 1991.

<sup>4</sup> Reggie McNeal, *A Work of Heart* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000) 79

We find ourselves in a space between, a liminal location, full of instability and contradictions. The old Latin word “limina” means threshold.<sup>5</sup> Liminality is a space in-between where nothing seems clear. One April Sunday my family and I visited a young church community in our town. On the way to the meeting we noticed two very different restaurant signs. The first invited, “Come in from the cold; warm food and hot drinks.” The second proclaimed, “Swing into spring. Escape the heat with our smoothies and Frappuccino’s.”

Is it winter, or spring? When the seasons are in transition, and the old season hasn't quite given way to the new, we don't know what kind of weather to expect or even how to dress on a given morning. When we walk out the door it might be hot, or it might be cold. Worse, it may start out warm then shift to cold while we are on the road. We are plunged into uncertainty.

When the church is in transition, the same kind of confusion surfaces. Even casual conversations can become complex, with people using language in very different ways. “Church” and “Christian” now carry baggage they didn't possess, and have different meanings relative to individual experience. The term “evangelical” once provided identity for a diverse group of believers worldwide. Now that marker itself is splintering, contested and fragile.<sup>6</sup>

Liminality is a place in between. It is emptiness and nowhere. Adolescence is the liminal space between childhood and adulthood; but what if entire communities are entering liminal space? Gareth Brandt writes, “Societal circumstances in the past few decades have created another developmental stage now known as emerging adulthood. The characteristics of this stage are inherently ambivalent, ideological, and transitional, which is why it is not easily recognizable as a distinct stage.”<sup>7</sup> Brandt is describing a new experience of liminality that grows out of unique cultural conditions.

While Brandt applies this concept to individuals, the transition from modernity to post-modernity and from Christendom to post-Christendom, combined with the rise of new media, has generated a liminal space for *entire communities* of faith. This is a *new phase*, a new space in ecclesial life. Churches are entering a nowhere land that has come into being in the turbulent waters of societal shift. We have become travelers with maps that are outdated and that no longer describe the landscape. The sense that our

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<sup>5</sup> The concept originates with anthropologist Arnold van Gennep, but was revived by Victor Turner and his study of rituals of transition in African tribes in 1964.

<sup>6</sup> See David Fitch, *The End of Evangelicalism* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011)

<sup>7</sup> Gareth Brandt, *Spirituality with Clothes On* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2014)

maps no longer function increases our sense of lostness, as well as our anxiety about the future.<sup>8</sup> The higher the emotional unrest, the less likely we are to respond effectively.<sup>9</sup>

Complex cultural forces are now generating liminal space for entire communities of people. General systems theory recognizes that the dynamics between individuals are mirrored on other scales. What is true for a family system can also be observed in organizational systems. In *The Critical Journey* the authors describe faith transitions as “hitting the wall.”<sup>10</sup> This difficult phase, beginning with an inward journey, often occurs for individuals in mid-life. Now, however, it’s happening for whole organizations. Hitting the wall is a manifestation of liminal conditions for faith organizations. Churches that have hitherto been very outward oriented, busy and successful, find themselves confronted with their deeper motivations as they begin to decline, and a thriving ministry passes into memory.<sup>11</sup> The outward journey gives way to an inward journey that requires heart work and the integration of the shadow self.<sup>12</sup>

In liminal space identity is suspended. In our time we are seeing entire church families in the throes of transition: suspended in a complex dance between life and death. This transitional space generates gut-wrenching questions and tremendous insecurity. As we move into a post-Christian and post-congregational<sup>13</sup> era, we seek understanding and solutions as our congregations grey and dwindle, and our ministries decline.

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<sup>8</sup> Ron Heifetz and Martin Linsky note the particular challenges of a disturbed system in *Leadership on the Line* (Harvard Business Review, 2002)

<sup>9</sup> Laurence Gonzales describes in *Deep Survival* how we stop thinking and the emotional brain takes over when our survival is at stake, or when we are in a situation that recalls an earlier response. Heifetz and Linsky talk about the need to manage our hungers (*Leadership on the Line*).

<sup>10</sup> Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich, *The Critical Journey* (Sheffield Publishing, 2005) 12.

<sup>11</sup> We are forced to reach beyond cultural definitions of success.

<sup>12</sup> Parker Palmer, Richard Rohr and others continue to remind us of this necessary part of the journey beyond self. See in particular *A Hidden Wholeness* (Palmer) and *A Work of Heart* (McNeal) and *The Gift of Being Yourself* (Benner)

<sup>13</sup> Coined by Reggie McNeal, among others. See *Missional Communities: The Rise of the Post-Congregational Church* (Jossey-Bass, 2011)

## The Gift of Instability

*Your vision will become clear only when  
you look into your heart ...  
Who looks outside, dreams.  
Who looks inside, awakens. ~ Carl Jung*

Jung captures the paradox of the inward journey. *Who looks inside, awakens.* If liminality is an intensely uncomfortable place, it is also a place of possibility. The word “threshold” connotes a passage, a path to somewhere. When identity is suspended, it becomes more fluid than fixed and is suddenly negotiable.<sup>14</sup> But this means that liminal space is not *nowhere*, but rather is a place of possibility. If fluidity represents anti-structure to structure, it is also a place of transformation. It is a place of dying and rebirth, even of metamorphosis, the place where the caterpillar spins its cocoon and disappears from view. Liminality is Israel in the desert, Jesus in the tomb.

We know is that God is interested in transformation. Perhaps this is why liminal space is so common, and why God often engineers the journey. Few of us choose liminal space. Yet increasingly leaders and churches find themselves in these transitional places, with no markers to guide them. Richard Rohr comments that,

Nothing good or creative emerges from business as usual. This is why much of the work of God is to get people into liminal space, and to keep them there long enough so they can learn something essential. It is the ultimate teachable space... maybe the only one. The Jewish prophets... St. Francis, Gandhi, and John the Baptist come to mind.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, in *Liquid Modernity* (2000), offers the powerfully suggestive image of “melting” to describe the economic, cultural, and intellectual forces of our era. These “melting powers” of modernity have intensified in recent years as we have fewer and fewer “givens” that help determine ethics, values, purpose, and meaning.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Rohr. “Days Without Answers in a Narrow Space.” *National Catholic Reporter*, Feb. 2002, 9.

Is it possible that the cultural shift is serving a kingdom purpose? Is it possible that God is the designer of our present cultural transition?<sup>16</sup> Yes, but perhaps not in the way we think. We might identify a cycle of birth and death and cultural renewal every five hundred years or so, as Phyllis Tickle affirms in *The Great Emergence*. Or we might explore adaptive science, where the church is a self-organizing system, with non-linear interactions in a changing environment, and powerful feedback loops.<sup>17</sup> This implies an emergent structure more than a design,<sup>18</sup> a fitting lens for an organic reality. God embedded the seeds of death and of renewal in creation itself. Living systems thrive on the edge of chaos, and begin to wither when their structures and mechanisms are too stable, their internal connections too strong.<sup>19</sup>

Whatever interpretive framework we adopt, the challenge is the same: to rediscover God's purposes in history. What is God's invitation to us in these strange and unfamiliar places? Or, to put it in terms of the story we know so well: "How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"

Alan Roxburgh, in *The Missionary Congregation, Leadership, & Liminality*, makes the case that liminal space is hopeful, and he develops the metaphor of "spaces between."<sup>20</sup> He also recognizes that the tendency in difficult times is not to dream of a new future, but of a familiar and idealized past. Transitions,

..[place] a group in great tension. Even in complex societies the impulses of groups in the liminal state move in two directions at the same time: turning backward to recover the lost identity, and risking moving forward. Set in these terms, it is possible to locate the North American churches. Currently much of the shaping conversation is

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<sup>16</sup> I agree with Alan Roxburgh that God has engineered these conditions. "the Spirit has been at work in this long unraveling." *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World*. Morehouse, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Such loops can be as simple as networks of conversations.

<sup>18</sup> Emergence and design exist along a shared continuum, according to commentator Fritjof Capra. A system drifting too far toward design becomes rigid, where a system moving too far toward emergence will have difficulty delivering its products and services. "Creativity and Leadership in Learning Communities," 1997.

<sup>19</sup> As Gunderson puts it, "Human institutions can crash after periods of success [and] bring about their own downfall because of the stresses and rigidities that have slowly accumulated." (*Panarchy*, 2002)

<sup>20</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh, *The Missionary Congregation, Leadership & Liminality* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1997) 34.

that of return. Beneath schemes of renewal and strategies of growth lie these liminal impulses of return and recovery.<sup>21</sup>

This kind of return is a step backward, yet another kind of return recalls an often echoed refrain in biblical history. “Return to Me.” Have our purposes been God’s purposes? Did we lose sight of the kingdom of God in favor of building smaller kingdoms we could manage and control? Too much of the conversation has been about return to an idealized past. That conversation merely increases our stuckness, and prevents rich engagement and fresh listening to God in our current location. Trying to return to an idealized “glory days” prevents an *adaptive* response.

In General Systems Theory, *homeostasis* describes the resistance of a system to change, and its tendency to seek stability. But a system that is pushed beyond its ability to adapt or compensate must seek a new basis of stability. Biologists use the term *fitness* to describe the ability of an organism to adapt to changing conditions. Fitness depends on numerous interrelated factors and is a complex mechanism that recognizes non-linearity and even chaos.<sup>22</sup>

While the hope is that organizations and individuals can successfully navigate complex conditions and come out the other side stronger, one only has to look around to see that this is not always the case. When we feel overwhelmed, we tend to bury our heads in the sand or try harder, looking for a bigger hammer. Ronald Wright, examining Mayan civilization, has demonstrated that civilizations near the end of their life-cycle increase their pace as they sense that the party is nearly over,<sup>23</sup> ensuring their rapid collapse.

Yet alternatives are what we need. When we move beyond familiar spaces, our previous experience may constrain rather than enable us. Eugene Lowry writes,

The reason that flashes of insight come when one is not looking is that our cognitive ruts lose their tenacious hold upon us when our mind is occupied with other things or begins to drift as we go to sleep. Hence, the unthinkable thought (generally inverted from common sense) has

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>22</sup> Pascale, Millemann, Gioja, *Surfing the Edge of Chaos* (Three Rivers Press, 2000) 106.

<sup>23</sup> Ronald Wright, *A Short History of Progress* (Canada Council for the Arts, 2004) 102. Curiously, most of us remember the same phenomenon in our six year olds, where they spin up faster before they finally crash.

a chance to break through. Such uncommon sense comes as an intuitive, “aha!”

Unfortunately, the more we know about a subject, the more apt we are to stay locked into our assumptions, and hence become blind to alternative perspectives.<sup>24</sup>

In Luke 9 and 10 Jesus offers us good advice for entering unknown places and discovering a new future. He recommends that we “take nothing for the journey.” Wait a minute: take *nothing* with us? It’s counter-intuitive. We are trained to be prepared; to make our best forecast of what lies ahead so that we are pre-adapted to the expected conditions. The trouble is, our preferred future is usually only the past projected forward.

Laurence Gonzales in *Deep Survival* describes exactly that response, and tells story after story of explorers and mountaineers who thought they were prepared, only to discover that they were sabotaged by their expectations of the future. We prepare for what we know, based on our experience of the past.

How then do we let go of our assumptions, even of our need to succeed? How do we become truly open to a new context and new learning? How do we enter an open space and dwell there? How do we, like Jesus, “empty ourselves and become nothing?” The lesson of Philippians 2 is humility – a need of a deeper spirituality. But how do we go deeper when we are fearful of letting go? The paradox of surrender invites us to a new journey, a renewed pilgrimage. As Lao Tzu has aptly noted, “a good traveler has no fixed plans, and is not intent on arriving.”

Thankfully, we have guides who through the centuries have gone before us, entering into the paradox of pilgrimage, getting beyond the polarities of movement and stability. TS Eliot is one such guide, who invites us to know the end in our beginning. As we move through these chapters – an inner journey into an open space – we’ll consider the strange realities of our time, consider the nature of adaptive challenge, examine new metaphors for leadership and change, and close with thoughts on renewed engagement in the strange and complex world we inhabit.

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<sup>24</sup> Eugene Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000) 53-54

Questions are fateful. They determine destinations. They are the chamber through which destiny calls.

Godwin Hlatshwayo

# 1

## Systems in Transition

In 2014 Canadian explorers made a magnificent discovery, locating one of the two Franklin expedition ships in the high Arctic. The history is well known. Franklin left England in 1845 on two ships with a crew of 128 officers and men in search of the Northwest Passage to the Pacific Ocean. It was a great adventure, in an age of adventure and discovery.<sup>25</sup>

The crew knew they were heading out into unknown waters on a journey of discovery; they knew there were risks. Not one member of the crew was ever found alive again. Their bodies have been found in shallow graves, dispersed across the frozen Arctic. *What happened?*

It wasn't an ordinary expedition. The ships, Erebus and Terror, were specially constructed. They were technological marvels of the age. And the ships were already veterans: they had taken a successful four-year mission to Antarctica, charting much of that continent's coastline under the leadership of Captain James Ross.

The ships were triple-masted. Their bows were reinforced with iron sheets to deflect polar ice, and full-sized steam engines added horsepower via a screw

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<sup>25</sup> The recent discoveries have been documented by the CBC:  
<http://www.cbc.ca/news2/canada/features/franklin/>

propeller. Beneath their decks, the *Erebus* and *Terror* carried copious rations. The manifest lists 24 tons of meat, 35 tons of flour, nearly two tons of tobacco, and no less than 7,500 liters of liquor. This was meant to sustain the 128-man crew for three full years, but the expedition didn't endure that long.

*What happened?*

A hint is found in how the expedition provisioned itself, what they saw as *necessary* for the journey. These men belonged to an era of exploration and had some awareness of the risks that might lie ahead. They must have talked a lot about those risks, as well as the opportunities for discovery and commerce that lay before them.

Franklin was a careful man and a scientist. He understood something of the challenges that lay ahead, in a time when old ways of understanding the world were falling and a new world was emerging. He would also have talked with those few other men who had sailed up to the Arctic, seeking to learn from their experience. *But in spite of this – they all died!* Alan Roxburgh writes that,

Clues to the tragedy are in the manifest: the well preserved list of what they took with them on the voyage. The manifest tells us what these adventurers *understood* to be important --and necessary for the journey. It captures the world in which they lived, a way of understanding themselves and their world. And that tradition would destroy them, because it made little sense in the environment of the Arctic.<sup>26</sup>

Franklin equipped his ships with a 1200 volume library; a hand organ that played fifty tunes; china place settings and expensive silver flatware. These Victorian era Englishmen *took their world* with them.

So important were these elements of their normal life in England that they only carried a *twelve day supply* of coal for their auxiliary engines, yet knowing the journey would last two to three years. Roxburgh continues,

The habits and customs of their world determined what they took with them when they abandoned ship to seek help. Bodies were

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<sup>26</sup> Alan Roxburgh, "Derivatives With a Twist," <http://www.alanroxburgh.net/> Accessed 2009.

found lying out on the frozen ice or in shallow graves, with their silver beside them. Despite their brave commitment to explore a new way through the North West Passage, Franklin and his crew went with the assumptions of a 19th Century English world. Those assumptions, based on their previous lives, killed them in the new space they entered.<sup>27</sup>

Franklin's story is a metaphor for what is happening to churches today. The programs we bring with us to innovate for tomorrow are like the china plates and library books that shaped the imagination of Franklin. They don't help us create a new world: *they only prevent us from leaving the familiar past behind*. They provide the sense of safety that prevents rich engagement in a new location.

Our old future is broken, and often just the familiar past projected forward, not a true future at all. *How do we walk with God into a new future – an unknown place?*

### Complexity and the Adaptive Challenge

If turbulent waters signal cultural shift, the confluence of other streams promises new insight into the nature of change itself. Complexity science grapples with the nature of life and change, and is the combination of three streams: 1) breakthroughs in life sciences, particularly biology and ecology; 2) new data in social science, particularly economics and psychology; 3) new discoveries in the hard sciences, particularly physics, math, and information technologies. But how do these disciplines help us to navigate the complex waters of cultural shift?

Over the past twenty or thirty years, a new body of literature has emerged around the science of complexity. This is a broad enquiry into the common properties of living things – beehives and bond traders, ecologies and economies. These insights have more recently been applied to human organizations, and have begun to impact management and business models, helping us understand confusing networks of interaction. For the purpose of this study, we need to consider four principles that grow out of the science of complexity that apply to the living system we call church. These principles are:

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

1. Equilibrium is a precursor to death. When a living system is in a stable state, it is less responsive to changes occurring around it. This places it at high risk.
2. In the face of threat, or when galvanized by a compelling opportunity, living things move to the *edge of chaos*. This unstable condition evokes innovation and novelty, and fresh solutions are more likely to be found.
3. When this destabilization occurs, the components of a living system *self-organize* and new forms and possibilities emerge from the chaos.
4. Living systems cannot be *directed* along a linear path. Unanticipated consequences are inevitable. The challenge is to disturb the system in such a way that the desired outcome is more likely.<sup>28</sup>

Lawrence Miller in his 1990 book *Barbarians to Bureaucrats*, notes that organizations have definable life-cycles and pass through predictable stages from life to death and sometimes to rebirth.<sup>29</sup> As Jean Vanier put it, what begins in passion often ends in bureaucracy, with ways and means becoming set in cement, and often continuing to run long after the purpose is forgotten.<sup>30</sup> A system like this is no longer responsive to its environment, and inevitably a collapse follows. New life springs from the decaying remains of the old. The following illustration is based in part on the work of Joseph Schumpeter and is found in the book *Panarchy: Understanding Transformations in Human and Natural Systems* (2002).

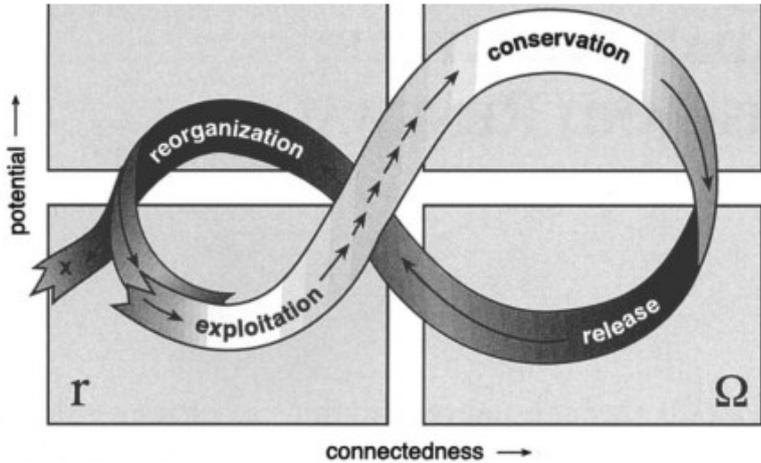
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<sup>28</sup> *Surfing*, 6.

<sup>29</sup> Lawrence Miller, *Barbarians to Bureaucrats: Corporate Life Cycle Strategies* (Fawcett Press, 1990)

<sup>30</sup> Margaret Wheatley writes, “The people who loved the purpose grow to disdain the institution that was created to fulfil it. Passion mutates into procedures, rules and roles. Instead of purpose, we have policies...” *A Simpler Way*, 1998.

Figure 1



There are four phases in the adaptive cycle, and here I follow the description offered in *Panarchy*, by Lance H. Gunderson.<sup>31</sup>

1. The rapid growth or *r* phase. Early in the cycle, the system is engaged in a period of rapid growth, as actors colonize recently disturbed areas. (Like a new suburb and the church that builds there). These species (referred to as *r*-strategists in ecosystems), utilize disorganized resources to exploit an ecological niche. They are start-ups and producers of new products; they capture shares in newly opened markets – or new suburbs!
2. The conservation or *K* phase. During this phase, energy and materials slowly accumulate. Connections between the actors increase. The competitive edge shifts from species that adapt well to external variability and uncertainty to those that reduce the impact of a changing environment through their own mutually reinforcing relationships. The growth rate slows as connectedness

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<sup>31</sup> Gunderson, Lance H. *Panarchy: Understanding Transformations in Human and Natural Systems* (Kindle Locations 167-176). Island Press. Kindle Edition.

increases to the point of rigidity: resilience declines. Such a system is increasingly stable, but over a decreasing range of conditions. “People want to stabilize [churches] for economic purposes. By doing that, we tend to lower the resilience of systems.”<sup>32</sup>

3. The release or omega ( $\Omega$ ) phase. A disturbance that exceeds the system’s resilience breaks apart its web of reinforcing interactions. This could be the loss of a founding pastor, or a sudden decline in employment in the area, or increased competition for members, or a major shift in demographics. In an abrupt turnabout, the material and energy accumulated during the conservation phase is released. Resources that were tightly bound are transformed or destroyed as connections break and systemic controls weaken. The release of accumulations of resources generates a creative element.
4. The renewal or alpha ( $\alpha$ ) phase. Following a disturbance, uncertainty rules. Feeble internal controls allow a system to lose or gain resources, but also allow novelty to appear. Small, chance events have the opportunity to powerfully shape the future. Invention, experimentation, and re-assortment are the rule. In ecosystems, pioneer species may appear from previously suppressed vegetation; seeds germinate; non-native plants can invade and dominate the system. Skills, experience, and expertise lost by individual groups may coalesce around new opportunities. Novelty arises in the form of new initiatives, creative ideas, and new people.

An example of the adaptive cycle is offered in *Panarchy*, based on a classic ecological study of spruce/fir forests that grow across a huge swath of North America. Among the forests’ many inhabitants is the spruce budworm, a moth whose larvae eat the new green needles on coniferous trees. Every 40 to 120 years, populations of spruce budworm explode, killing off up to 80% of the balsam firs. But what looks like destruction turns out to be necessary for the health of the system. Renewal follows this episode as nutrients are released, and the forests regrow to repeat the cycle.

Following World War II, before the dynamics of the system were understood, a campaign to control spruce budworm became a huge effort to regulate a natural resource using pesticide spraying. The attempt was to minimize the economic consequences of the pest on the forest industry in Eastern Canada. It ran into problems early on. “The goal was not to eliminate the insect but to keep the forest green, which, unfortunately, is good for budworm too,

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<sup>32</sup> Gunderson, *Panarchy* (Kindle Location 188).

since they like mature trees.”<sup>33</sup> While the spraying regime avoided a catastrophic outbreak, it allowed the insect to flourish while the problem spread. Meanwhile, the limited success of the program had other consequences, increasing industry’s dependence on the spraying program, and spawning more pulp mills.

Ecosystem management generally focuses on maximizing the output of a particular product with the goal of increasing productivity of a narrowly defined product. A very similar story is offered from the corporate world in the development of the first arterial stent by Johnson & Johnson in 1994.<sup>34</sup> These efforts at control reduce the overall resilience of the system, leaving it rigid and vulnerable. At the same time, management becomes myopic and rigid, focused on maximizing success. Related industries become more dependent and inflexible.

Consider the North American church; our goal (product) is disciples. We have focused on maximizing output, but we have done this mostly by aiming our effort at getting butts in seats. We have largely assumed that the more people who attend our services, the greater will be our output of disciples. But as REVEAL<sup>35</sup> demonstrated, this has not been the case.

Meanwhile the *perception* of success, with a full house in a large auditorium, and abundant finances as a result, has been a powerful incentive to keep doing more of the same. Leaders become myopic, fixated on maintaining the methods that attract large crowds. The system becomes rigid, finely tuned toward the goal of keeping the place full and keeping the wheels turning. The stronger the element of design, the less often we see novelty and adaptation to a changing environment. As Gunderson notes, “Human institutions can crash after periods of success [and] bring about their own downfall because of the stresses and rigidities that have slowly accumulated.”<sup>36</sup> Kevin Kelly of *Wired Magazine* wrote that, “Organizations, like living beings, are hardwired to optimize what they know and not to throw success away. A company expends energy to move its butt uphill, or to evolve its product so that it is sitting on top, where it is maximally adapted to the consumer

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., Kindle Location 222

<sup>34</sup> Pascale, Millemann, Gioja, 171-174.

<sup>35</sup> Christianity Today, “What Reveal Reveals,” March, 2008

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/march/11.27.html>

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., Kindle Location 320.

environment. Companies find devolving (a) unthinkable and (b) impossible.”<sup>37</sup>

The resulting problem is thus twofold: 1) we are not producing disciples, but rather consumers. Any attempt to switch focus results (as it should!) in a crisis; 2) the system we have produced is self-referenced and largely a closed loop, out of touch with the surrounding culture. Thus we can't quickly change tracks to engage those who need the gospel because we lack the local knowledge needed to connect. Moreover, the most creative leaders are often among those who have already left the building,<sup>38</sup> tired of the limits on their creativity and tired of seeking to be heard by those too busy to listen. The loss of these creative types only hastens the systemic decline.

### The New Environment

In this fallen world, success both potentiates and creates inevitable problems. Humans thrive with stability – but the gospel seems to thrive on the edge of chaos. That produces an inherent tension in our organizations. But note that the cycle we are seeing is *designed into* living systems; it's in the DNA. This means that the current decline we are seeing may be a naturally occurring phenomena, not something sovereignly engineered by God, though God will use it to equip his people for mission and to purify our motives.

A comment on emergence and design is in order here. Emergence and design exist on a continuum – a system drifting too far toward design becomes rigid, and will have difficulty generating new experiments when adaptation is necessary. On the other hand, a system moving too far toward emergence will have difficulty delivering its products and growing as an organism. Engineer types love to design structures; artistic types constantly tear them down, hoping something new will emerge. We need some structures in order to grow an organization and generate some predictability. But too much structure results in rigidity and over-management, which saps creativity.

While the problems and challenges are real, and evangelical churches are shrinking in Western settings, there are still signs of life in the West. In Canada this is documented in video productions like “One Size Fits All,” (Joe Manafó) and in books like “Borderland Churches” (2008) and “Text &

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<sup>37</sup> Kevin Kelly, “New Rules for the New Economy.” Wired Magazine. September 1997, 192-194.

<sup>38</sup> According to the work of Alan Jamieson, Dave Kinnaman and more recently Packard and Hope in *Church Refugees*.

Context” (2013). The Downtown Windsor Community Collaborative in Windsor, Ontario is rediscovering the power of community and collaboration for the common good. The Journey Network in Ottawa, Ontario is rediscovering parish even as they de-centralize the function of leadership. Metro Community in Kelowna, BC has moved back into the downtown core and thrives in their ministry to the poor and marginalized. Calvary Grandview in North Vancouver, BC moved from a commuter church to a parish church working for justice while deepening connections in their neighbourhood.

These shifts are occurring around the globe, in Capetown, Auckland, Hong-Kong, London, San Francisco and Denver. Agencies empowering leaders to fresh engagement are likewise emerging. In the UK and Australia there are FORGE and Fresh Expressions, now both active in North America. Also in the UK documents like “Mission Shaped Church” and “The End of Christendom” have grown out of serious attempts to understand cultural shift and re-engage. In the USA and Canada *The Gospel and our Culture Network* was formed in the mid 1980’s, and many good articles as well as *Missional Church* (Jossey-Bass) were the result. More recently Ryan Bolger edited “The Gospel After Christendom” (Baker, 2012), relating stories of innovation and renewal from around the world. Around the same time the Parish Network was growing legs in BC, Washington and Oregon. Unfortunately, our educational institutions lag behind and often continue to train leaders for a stable Christendom culture.

## Navigators, not Map Readers

In a crisis, we call for someone with answers, decision, strength, and a map of the future — in short, someone who can make hard problems simple... Instead of looking for saviours, we should be calling for leadership that will challenge us to face problems for which there are no simple, painless solutions — problems that require us to learn new ways.<sup>39</sup>

In the spring of 1980 I was looking for a job. I crossed paths with a college friend who had secured a summer job as a fishing guide, and headed up to Stuart Island, in the mouth of Bute Inlet, with him.

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<sup>39</sup> Ron Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Harvard University Press, 1994) 21.

My first day training was eye opening. I thought the ocean was a large, predictable body of water. I found myself being pushed around in a small boat in tidal waters between islands. Imagine a river that flows north one day at 4 knots. The next morning you return to the same place and its flowing south at 6 knots. Hugh whirlpools spin off rocks, sometimes reaching two hundred feet across and fifty feet in depth. Change is constant. The “terrain” of the ocean and its currents is unpredictable because of islands, underwater obstacles, and the weather. While the phases of the moon offered us a guideline in terms of the time of maximum flow, even maximum flow varied by a knot or more depending on location.

We live in a time where the landscape has become fluid. What was once predictable and stable is now like the rapids I faced as a sport fishing guide: one day 4 knots south, the next day 6 knots north. Like the chaos of tidal waters, the settled and predictable ways of Modernity and Christendom have given way to plurality and fragmentation.

What do we do when maps no longer describe the territory? How do we locate ourselves, and then find the way forward? Eddie Gibbs offers the clue: when maps stop working, we train navigators.

The Church needs navigators tuned to the voice of God, not map-readers. Navigational skills have to be learned on the high seas and in the midst of varying conditions produced by the wind, waves, currents, fogbanks, darkness, storm clouds and perilous rocks.<sup>40</sup>

Navigation is a significantly different skill than map reading. The points on a map are fixed, and when one wants to travel in the real world one simply locates oneself by correspondence to known geography or artifacts, and then proceeds step by step to the next point. If you have a compass and a bit of logic, this is really, really easy.

But *navigation* requires no fixed planetary points. Instead, one learns to read the sky – the stars, really – and orients by a point *outside* the world. This requires a sense of 3D space, and the ability to apply an *imaginative framework* to the real world.

Map reading requires only logic and a table top. Any ten year old can master it then take a compass and use that knowledge with a high degree of confidence. Navigation, on the other hand, is a skill that is learned in the wilderness or on the ocean. It requires courage and the ability to withstand harsh conditions. When we can't reference earthly artifacts we need something outside the world: the North Star.

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<sup>40</sup> Eddie Gibbs, *Leadership Next* (Downer's Grove: IVP, 2005) 66.

Navigation is both an old skill and an ancient metaphor. John Climacus uses the Greek word *kubernetes* in the early seventh century *Ladder of Divine Ascent*. The word means *pilot, helmsman, or guide*, and he used it to speak of spiritual direction. When a ship is entering a harbor universal knowledge is no longer adequate, local knowledge becomes critical. The pilot comes alongside the captain and crew to guide them safely through unfamiliar waters, past hidden obstacles. Travelling in a straight line in unknown waters can get you killed.

Navigators need something that is never required of map readers: faith and a fundamental inner quiet. When there are no physical points to locate ourselves, our emotional brain takes over and we stop thinking. Navigators require internal self-controls that map readers don't need.

We don't really need navigators in times of cultural stability; we need them desperately in seasons of transition. And as we might expect, we have great stories of navigators in the Old Testament. There were no maps for the people of Israel leaving Egypt, only a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

### Journeys off the Map

Most of us began our journey in leadership with a clear sense of purpose, and a decent set of skills and capacities. We trained in a context that had a clear and set agenda, to prepare us for another context that was predictable and stable. If we are lucky, we then found a job in an organization that was also fairly stable, and we experienced a satisfying measure of success. That experience bolstered our sense of self, and we settled into a rhythm that we expected would continue until retirement. And then everything went south.

When the environment is stable, as we observed above, we get used to rhythms and routines that don't offer much challenge. We know how to work the system and achieve our goals. The organization grows and our skill set grows and expands. And then something unexpected happens. The context changes. We lose key leaders to age, movement, burn-out, or a host of other factors. Perhaps there is a major church battle. Whatever the reason, it becomes more and more difficult to just maintain stability, much less grow the organization. This experience of "hitting the wall" may be very personal, or it may seem to occur outside of us. No matter, the result is the same. We find ourselves asking uncomfortable questions about our vocation, our identity, and about God's purposes in our work. Suddenly the outward journey becomes an inward journey.

It's tough enough when this happens to individuals. But now entire churches have entered a nowhere land that has come into being in the turbulent waters of societal shift. We have become travelers with maps that are outdated and that no longer describe the landscape. Complex cultural forces are now generating liminal space for entire communities of people.

When churches hit the wall the level of anxiety can be extremely high. Leaders in particular feel enormous pressure to develop a plan that will effectively move the community forward to a new experience of stability, if not growth. But frequently leaders lack both the knowledge and the skill to embark on the necessary journey. The old maps have failed and the knowledge needed for navigation on the turbulent ocean has not been developed.

Organizations are optimized for success in a narrow environmental range. When the environment shifts drastically, we barely know where to start. Moreover, the creative and innovative types who have typically found other challenges and moved on. We lack even the resources to begin to engage in the new space we are in. Can we admit we are lost and don't know where to begin? Can we learn to listen for the unknown future? Can we trust that God will lead us forward as we move off the map?

One voice tells us to work harder; another blames the context. If we just had different skills, more help, a younger organization, etc then we could find our way through. Another voice, buried by the anxious voice on the surface, is more authentic. It calls us to be still; to trust and wait on God. It tells us that the answer we seek is not the latest program for church growth but something more obvious that has been there all along. We somehow know there is a new future ahead of us, but the wall that stops us seems overwhelming. We feel like David facing Goliath without a slingshot!

If we are wise enough to pay attention to the quieter voice, it might sound something like this:

Enough.  
These few words are enough.  
If not these words, this breath.  
If not this breath, this sitting here.

This opening to the life  
we have refused  
again and again  
until now.

Until now.<sup>41</sup>

*What if everything in your life was actually enough?* We don't usually consider this possibility.

*What if you could claim this strange and painful place as a gift?*

In *The Present Future* Reggie McNeal offers this word for tired leaders.

God must have a lot of confidence in you to put you on the planet at just this time. It was his sovereign decision to insert you onto planet earth during a time of huge transition. It takes incredible faith to lead during hinge points of history.

Think about John the Baptist as a transitional leader. John saw heaven open and the Spirit descend when he baptized his first cousin. Yet when he was in jail he sent word to Jesus, "Now, let's go over this one more time: are you the one?" Jesus doesn't slam John. In fact, he extols his cousin: "There's never been a better man born," Jesus says (Luke 7:28).

Jesus doesn't slam you for your doubts, fears and uncertainties either. He wants to encourage you in your current assignment. You are being asked to lead during a time when you are not sure where all this is going. If previous history is an accurate indicator, the kinds of changes we are undergoing will not settle out for another century or more. This means that some of you are giving direction to the great-great-grandparents of the leaders of the Christian movement when it all shakes out on the other side of the postmodern wormhole. You are leading by faith, trusting that the subplot obediences you practice will contribute to the larger drama. Your courage to believe with partial sight will be rewarded one day when a full view is afforded.

On the flip side, you have the chance to do what only a few have been privileged to do. You get the chance to give shape to the movement that will define its expression for perhaps hundreds of years (if Jesus tarries). You must choose carefully.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> David Whyte, *The Heart Aroused* (New York: Doubleday, 1994)

<sup>42</sup> Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003)

At the center of your experience is God and his grace. Place your trust in him as you work toward understanding this awkward place we are in. The experience of feeling lost is just that: an experience. You aren't lost. *You are right here.*