

# Field Theory, Relationships and Emotional Intelligence

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Harry Stack Sullivan said that an infant six months old could spot anxiety in a parent the instant he or she enters the room<sup>1</sup>. Further, the infant then “catches” the anxiety him or her self. This is early evidence of something most of us know from experience, but may have repressed. As a child I become skilled at “reading” my parents and others. What I am reading are the signals, many of them invisible, that are emanating from another that, together with the signals emanating from me, make up a “field”. The positive or negative charge of that field will determine the quality of interaction between us—whether it is collaborative and building, or competitive and defensive.

Fields are made up of words, vocals (tone, hesitations, emphasis, etc.) and non-verbals (expressions, tensions, gestures, signs, shadows, decor, flavors, feel, etc.) and memories. “Reading” is short for perceiving and connecting—to-organize and create meaning. As Robert Kegan says, “...what an organism does is organize; and what a human organism organizes is meaning...we literally make sense.”<sup>2</sup> Kegan goes on to say, “Thus it is not that a person makes meaning, as much as that *the activity of being a person is the activity of meaning-making*.”<sup>3</sup> The “activity of meaning-making depends upon perceiving *connections*. Thus *anything* that limits or discourages connection-making is destructive of being.”

We often hear the phrase, “He or she is a poor communicator.” In fact, there are very few “poor communicators”. Nearly everyone transmits clearly and most of us receive accurately. The problem is that the message is one we do not like and we call that poor communicating.

## Quantum Theory and Self-Development

Margaret Wheatley (1994)<sup>4</sup> explores the implications of sub-atomic particle theory for organizations. When I apply it to myself and my development, it goes something like this: I come into the world as a bundle of potential analogous to a wave packet. The bit of matter in a wave packet has the potential to become either a wave or a particle depending on the invisible forces or field with which it comes into contact. It is simply *potential until that relationship happens*.

As a human being I have much more complex potentials than the either/or wave packet, yet I *am* defined by the various fields to which I respond. In a sense, wave packets are brought into “existence” by the field. It is interesting to speculate that I might be invisible until brought out by relating—that is, I only *become* when I am interacting with a field. This field may be between me and a thing—like a sunset or a tree. Perhaps the reason

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<sup>1</sup> Sullivan, Harry Stack, *The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry*, W. W. Norton, New York, 1953

<sup>2</sup> Kegan, Robert, *The Evolving Self*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1982

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Wheatley, Margaret J., *Leadership and the New Science*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., San Francisco, 1992, 1994

I am continually thinking, interacting with myself, is to keep me in a state of being; keep me in a field. The fundamental difference between a wave packet and me is that I am self-activating. I have a continual relationship with myself.

### **The Composition of Fields or Genes and Memes**

Carl Sagan in *The Dragons of Eden* (1977) did some calculations about the contents of our brains, "...the book of life is very rich; a typical chromosomal DNA molecule in a human being is composed of about five billion pairs of nucleotides. The genetic instructions..."<sup>5</sup> are written in these nucleotides in much the same way that information is stored in a computer in the form of bits, or binary digits. Dr. Sagan then computes that the genetic instructions are roughly the equivalent of a library of four thousand volumes, each volume containing five hundred pages. It is important to understand that the underlying theme of all these instructions is short-term **survival**. And that they were formed to deal with the conditions that obtained millions of years ago.

In later calculations, Dr. Sagan gives figures that allow me to conclude that I absorb or "learn" approximately 650 new volumes a year; about two a day. It is interesting to speculate just what it means to absorb or "learn" in this sense.

What is being absorbed are memes—a meme is a unit of cultural information comparable to a gene. Initially memes are shaped by the mind—for example, the custom of relegating females to an inferior position. However, "...the information we generate has a life of its own,"<sup>6</sup> and it may become a disservice to our best interests.

Much of the early learning is simple filing of impressions. Seeing colors, touching, hearing, and making noises. Dewey (1957)<sup>7</sup> says that understanding is seeing the relationships between one thing and another. Kegan (1982) says that the process of being is constructing meaning out of what I sense. Given the theme of my genetic instructions I imagine that the theme of survival is continued in my organization of meaning. My highest priority remains survival. Csikszentmihalyi (1993, pg 155) believes there are two opposite tendencies in evolution toward survival: interactions that lead toward harmony—the ability to obtain energy through cooperation and building on each other—synergy; and changes or interactions that lead to conflict, reactivity and adversarial ness, destructive disorder and entropy.

As a result, in my early volumes there are two kinds of stories: those that increase my complexity (differentiation and integration) and reflect harmony, cooperation and synergy; those meanings that threaten my integrity—my capacity to be autonomous and included—and lead toward conflict, disorder and entropy.

My genetic instructions reinforce my ability to distinguish between connections that mean threat and those that signal learning. Threat produces a shot of adrenaline energy. Connecting to learn results in a shot of endorphin. Adrenaline *prepares* me for

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<sup>5</sup> Sagan, Carl, *The Dragons of Eden*, Random House, New York, 1987

<sup>6</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly, *The Evolving Self*, Harper Collins, New York, 1993, pg.121

<sup>7</sup> Dewey, John, *How We Think*, D. C. Heath, Boston, 1933

conflict—fight or flight, while the endorphin feeling celebrates formation of a new meaning that will make me a better survivor.

In effect, endorphins encourage me to be invested in learning leading to greater integrated differentiation—the stuff of wisdom and maturity. Adrenaline generates energy to be invested in defense and protection so that I can continue to survive.

The pay-offs in modern times are vastly different. Adrenaline energy is animal excitement with limited usefulness toward harmony and complexity (differentiation and integration) since it does not move me toward new meaning/learning. Endorphin energy, on the other hand, promotes movement toward complexity.

### **Energy and Complexity**

Complexity is achieved through combining differentiation and integration. **Differentiation** in one sense is the degree to which a system (i.e. an organ such as the brain, or an individual, such as me) is composed of parts that differ in function from one another (Csikszentmihalyi, pg 156). In another sense, differentiation is an instinctually rooted life force which propels me to grow to be autonomous—to be an emotionally separate person with the ability to think, feel, and act for myself. (Bowen, 1985)<sup>8</sup>

**Integration** is the extent to which the different parts of a system communicate and enhance one another's goals. Bowen assumes a life force—togetherness—that keeps individuals connected.

An example that illuminates the difference between the effects of adrenaline and endorphin energy is the comparison of a violent TV show with a learning experience. In the TV an evil bully thwarts show the hero. After the threat and danger is established and through my identification with the hero I have gotten my shot of adrenaline, my hero calls on his skill in Karate to overcome and humiliate the bully. I discharge my energy as he resolves the danger.

I compare these sensations with the gradual comprehension of implications I experience when I connect and make meaning out of a statement like, "Unacknowledged shame is a pathogen. It kills. Hidden... shame can stalk one's being, inflicting an unconscious self-loathing."

One experience gives strong sensations of energy and aliveness (excitement) that are discharged as my hero overcomes the bully. I have enjoyed the experience and have not grown in either differentiation or integration. In the quote from Robert Karen's<sup>9</sup> article on shame I derive a new and deeper understanding of my own operations; have slightly increased my autonomy, and am alerted to the possibility of integrating shame by not hiding it. Endorphin energy conditions me toward complexity where adrenaline energy gives me enjoyable sensations if I am not threatened, or, if threatened, prepares me for protection or aggression.

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<sup>8</sup> Bowen, Murray, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, Jason Aronson, Northvale, New Jersey, 1985

<sup>9</sup> Karen, Robert, *Shame*, The Atlantic Monthly, February, 1993

In my modern civilized world actual threats to my life are rare, yet I am structured by my genes to use my sensitive alertness to scan for possible threat in every field I encounter. The “dangers” I respond to are seldom to bodily harm, but are threats to my integrity and autonomy; signals that I perceive as undermining my need to be and feel meaningful, but I respond as though they are life-threatening.

Every field brings into being behaviors that either foster complexity and growth or deny it. Positive fields fall on a spectrum from passive encouragement to appreciative mutuality, to love. The common characteristic is *spiritual equality*. The test is: does it nurture connection-making and complexity (differentiation and integration)? Negative fields can vary from the kind of enjoyable responses stimulated by TV violence, to the kind of reactivity and toxicity generated by abuse. The common characteristic is that the context contains elements of inequality; someone or something is attempting to exert power-over and control. Both parties to this context are failing to grow. The test is: does it nurture new connections?

### **The Anatomy of Fields or How Relationships Work**

Fields are created by transmissions and the perception of the transmissions. To the old question, “If a tree falls in the forest and there is no one there, does it make a sound?” the answer has to be, “We don’t know.” However, we *do* know that it does not create a field because there is no one there to connect and make meaning of the transmissions; no action is brought into being.

Human transmissions are made up of words, vocals, and non-verbals. When a transmission is perceived, it brings into being a field and this field is called a relationship. The Stone Center of Wellesley College has established the idea that every relationship, when it comes into being, becomes an entity that persists in memory. It mediates all subsequent transmitting and receiving.

In the relationships between people I believe the factor that governs whether or not the field will bring out synergy or destructive disorder is the perception of power and control. When I receive a transmission I scan it for threat to my integrity. I ask, “Is this person going to use power-over me?” When my answer is “yes”, my “...instinctually rooted life force which propels me to grow to be autonomous...” kicks in and I defend myself. (Bowen, 1985).

If I am low on the differentiation scale, most of my energy goes into defensive maneuvers; if my differentiation is well developed, I can collaborate reasonably. However, whenever there is a field of power-over, some of my energy is devoted to defensiveness and synergy is unlikely.

### **The Power-Over Syndrome**

The hierarchical, power-over configuration is firmly rooted in my genetic instructions. I was designed to compete for the highest possible position in the “chain of command”. My basic instruction is to look out for number one, myself.

As we humans have evolved we have learned that there are more effective ways of operating than those dictated by hierarchies. But there are powerful influences; both genetic and cultural that keep me confused and uncertain. The near-worship of competition makes it almost impossible to develop fields and relationships of equality and basic respect. To compound the difficulty the term “equal” connotes absolute equivalence—a realistic impossibility.

As Lord Acton pronounced, “Power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely”. I am now appreciating that the exercise of power corrupts both the person in power and the person who submits. Each gets detached from his or her integrity, his completeness and is subject to distracting goals—on one hand, getting compliance, on the other defending against threat, both preclude synergy.

The equality field that brings into being cooperation and synergy depends on the recognition that the spiritual self and personhood alive in each of us deserves full respect regardless of unequal gifts, resources, and development. When this full respect is accorded, it creates fields that call into being maximum energy for collaborative accomplishment and individual fulfillment.

From the evidence of thousands of sessions, the impulses to control, to exert power—over, to compete and express disrespect, lead toward conflict, destructive disorder, defensiveness, waste of energy, and entropy.

### **Consciousness**

Once I become aware of the consequences of my transmissions I can take responsibility for them and deliberately manage for cooperation and synergy. I have an inkling of the enormous influence of loving and respectful fields. Even though my family’s cultural surround is not carefully supportive, to the degree the field is positive, I devote my energy to growth. I am in a “holding environment” that allows me to risk the experiments that are necessary if I am to reach new levels of competence.

In Synectics invention sessions we witness how a carefully managed field can help people solve problems that have previously frustrated them. Imagine the possibilities for increased harmony and development if I were able to create such a field whenever I communicate—the positive energy it would free up from need-to-defend.

To bring this about, first, I need to know “by heart” the transmissions that beget entropy and those that breed synergy. (See charts). And second, I need to learn how to implement them, and finally, because many of them are counter-cultural and *subject to extinction* in the usual cultural surround, I need a safe place to regularly practice them and make them *my* language.

“Truly creative individuals are those who succeed, against all pressures of instinct and worldly wisdom, in visualizing a way of life that will make the lot of others freer and happier.” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993, pg 14)

### **Vision**

To become such a field generator I need to develop my capacity to envision my most profound heart's desire—make visible to myself the life I want to bring into being. This vision is essential to my integrity. It gives direction to each of my myriad of choices. Without a clear vision, I am prey to impulse, expediency, and outside power and control. I am ill-equipped to actualize my potential.

I need a clear personal vision such as:

I wish to be a creator of positive, loving fields

- a. within myself
- b. with my wife and children
- c. with those I meet and work with

Because these fields create and govern, in large measure, the valence of my thinking and acting. In effect, these fields bring me into being.

**How to:**

- 1. Develop a conscious vision for my life.**
- 2. Train myself to be conscious of my vision in every relationship.**
- 3. Develop a group vision that is consistent with each member's vision for self.**
- 4. Develop a group vision that also serves the company of which I am part.**