Maintaining the Connections that Sustain
Community

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Abstract: In 2004, a group of women singers from Canberra, Australia produced a major work called 'Websong' and presented it to an international audience in Bulgaria. This paper presents results from an ethnographic study of their production processes, including use of the Web to communicate and create. Websong uses dance, ritual and singing to enact a cycle of cataclysm, lament and renewal. As with all their work, Chorus chose to manage their work without an appointed director so that each member effectively took a governance role. This necessitates a high degree of reflexivity on the part of the group as a whole, requiring them to manage and sustain the necessary threads of connection, on various levels; creatively, organizationally, philosophically, socially. Their work is discussed through considering Chorus as a Community of Practice and using Gregory Bateson's understanding of reflexivity as a prime characteristic of self sustaining systems, both natural and cultural. From this perspective we see that the threads of connection so valued by members of chorus are characteristic of all sustainable living systems. The close analysis of Chorus working together reveals processes that can be applied to support sustainability for communities and possibly to enrich the discourses about connection between human and environmental sustainability.

Keywords: Ethnography, Communities of Practice, Sustainable Communities, Reflexivity, The Web

Introduction

Sustaining social relations and ensuring good quality of life is a vital task, though its significance is often taken for granted until it doesn't work and we see widespread violence, dislocation or despair. This article reports some results from research about a group of women in Canberra Australia, whose work is focused on social sustainability, especially the need for integrity and truthfulness in public life. From their beginning in early 2003, A Chorus of Women (or 'Chorus') saw their role as similar to that of the chorus in ancient Greece, where the artistic expression of public concerns was seen as essential to the health of the democracy. They chose to work with a style of self-governance that had no designated formal leader. A Chorus of Women meet, compose music and songs, sing and dance in public presentations to 'sing up the web of life, sing up the web of law'. Much of their time is spent with each other in discussions of philosophy, email exchanges and rehearsals to prepare themselves for their public presentations. They spend this time in order to build robust group processes that will keep the group in a condition to both perceive and express the social dilemmas of their place and time.

The model of social sustainability implicit in the work of Chorus resonates with that outlined in a report for the future work of the Housing and Sustainable Communities Project in Perth, Australia. Their model is represented by concentric circles where social sustainability sits within and is contingent upon environmental sustainability (Barron & Gauntlett, 2002: 5). Economic sustainability is contingent upon both. Based on such a model, the report defines social sustainability in the following terms: 'Social sustainability occurs when the formal and informal processes, systems, structures and relationships actively support the capacity of current and future generations to create healthy and liveable communities. Socially sustainable communities are equitable, diverse, connected and democratic and provide a good quality of life.' (Barron & Gauntlett, 2002: 7).

Websong

This article is concerned with a particular work created by Chorus called Websong . A previous article has detailed the background of the group and the methods of the research fieldwork, defining Chorus as a knowledge-sharing group and employing the conceptual frameworks of Knowledge Management and Communities of Practice (see Gillard and Laudine, 2005 for a more detailed description of the formation of Chorus, its values and the way Websong was created). The subject of social sustainability provides a different view from which to examine

the dynamics within the group that have been consciously developed to support their invocation of democratic processes in public life.

The main interest of this analysis is in the group dynamics as members of Chorus created Websong for presentation in Bulgaria at an international Archaeomythology conference. Chorus continues to develop new work for public performance but this one work exemplifies much of the practice of the group. Websong is an enactment and celebration of a cycle of cataclysm, death and renewal. It begins with a singing of these patterns then cataclysm, with a crescendo of noise and images of conflict, war and fire. In the stillness that follows, a young woman sees bones scattered on the ground, and cries of bereavement are heard. At this point the women sing 'Lament' as they move through a labyrinth formation. In a ritual they collect the bones, wrap them in a woven blanket and twine, and pour water on them. The bones are passed around a circle but in the arms of the oldest woman they are transformed into new life — into a baby. The young woman is given the baby and shares her joy in the baby with the other women.

Images and poetry about eucalypts sprouting in blackened forests express the wonder of new life after devastation, and songs of renewal end the performance with an invocation to:

> Hope life, weep life, grieve life, mourn life
> in its passing,
>   Sow life, grow life, bestow life, know life
> in its magic.

Following the performances of Websong in Bulgaria, two years were spent in the analysis of the interviews of Chorus members, their email discussions during this time, the extensive videotapes of rehearsals and performances and the diary and reflections of the participant researcher. This article describes some aspects of Chorus' group process we have discovered that have relevance to the question of how social sustainability can be created and supported within small groups and in public life. We discuss these findings in relation to notions of governance in self-sustaining systems.

Participation and Collaboration

The development of the Websong performance was both exciting and difficult because it was deliberately created through a joint process, without appointing a director who would have authority over the performance. Chorus has considerable resources and talent within the group, including two women very skilled in teaching choral music and others who are composers, professional singers, dancers, artists and ceramicists. Others in the group have little musical knowledge or singing experience and bring their organizational, parenting and other relational or artistic skills. In an email, September 2004, one member described the group as follows:

> There is an amazing array of varying talents across the group. Most of the time we seem to be better than most groups at acknowledging each other's talents; listening to each others' points of view, problems etc; working collaboratively.

The development of Websong was collaborative in many senses. It incorporated material suggested by many members of the group, based on their dreams and experiences. This was discussed in 'philosophy' meetings held regularly once a week where women related dreams and experiences or brought songs and poems created by them. Objects were also created by a few women working together, for example the spinning and weaving of alpaca fleece into a cloth to wrap the bones and the forming and decoration of a jug for pouring water. Research, personal talk and creative skills were developed between small groups of women and this creative activity was then brought back to the larger group.

As well as regular 'philosophy' meetings, there were rehearsals once a week and in Bulgaria this intensified to morning and night and during the day if there was an opportunity. One videotape of a rehearsal, taken in the bus as we journeyed through countryside from Sophia to Rila illustrates the ways expertise and leadership were employed within the group. Judy is teaching a song she has composed ('Tree of Life') which begins with the words, 'You got a right, I got a right, we all got a right to the tree of life'. Hand bells have been passed around and there is laughter as well as concentration as we rehearse the different parts and the use of the bells. Judy stands behind or across from the singers so she can see them (and not fall over as the bus lurches). Johanna, who also provides much of the singing expertise for the group is sitting further forward across the aisle from Anne and goes through her part, explaining the intervals in the melody by using her hands in ways that communicate effectively

to Anne, who is a dancer. Judy and Johanna work together in this example by different, complementary activities.

The content of performances was also drawn from collective experience and extensive feedback. For example, an email from Glenda in March 2003 asked for members' dreams to be used in relation to the Websong project and whether it was all right to use them in lyrics for a song she was writing. Another email early in April, 2004 confirmed that the dreams were used in the writing of the piece 'Oracle of Laws':

> The laws I am concerned with here are the central matters of Websong . They govern the cycle of death and renewal, and the process of becoming fully human. Partial guidance for this song has been gathered from the dreams of Chorus women.

'Oracle of Laws', is the second scene of Websong . The lyrics contain details from dreams and experiences after the devastating Canberra fires of January 2003 and news images from the Iraq war.

> After the fire we found bones
>   In the haunted charcoal forest
>   Shee ee ee, Ha aa aa ah
>   Cries the black ash in the marrow.
>   While we were watching the news
>   Of rage and hate and destruction,
>   Woe, woe
>   We hear the lament of the mothers.
>   Lu-lay, lu-lay, My son, My flesh,
>   They drowned your breath in Ibar Stream.
>   O mothers, Cry out your longing and love.

To create and perform an original artistic production enacting a cycle of cataclysm, death and renewal was a large undertaking. Members of the group had to draw on their personal skills, courage, insight, emotional maturity and humour and give freely of their time and financial resources. One member described the process in an interview:

> I really like to hear people putting forward their own different opinion . . . because it's a quality I really value and I'd like to be able to do it more myself. . .This is a very interesting process for me. Somehow there's a swirling richness of connectedness and I think, love, in a way,

even though there's maybe some conflict of personality types.

Opposition and Conflict

From the beginning, Websong was conceived as a way of moving from lamenting toward 'seeking ways of repairing our world' (email in January, 2004). An email in early February elaborates that Chorus seeks to 'revivify the participative, non-adversarial democratic tradition of the (Greek) Chorus'. A Chorus of Women speaks as 'citizens concerned with public morality and without sectional interest, commenting on events and holding them up to public scrutiny'. The theme was reflected in one interview where a member of Chorus spoke of its significance for her:

> the very strong core of Chorus is that it's non-adversarial…I've been angry . . . and I don't want that kind of anger any more. I want the creating harmony – the bringing beauty back into it, finding ways of dealing with conflict and resolving conflicts that are not destructive.

Sometimes the creative process drew deeply on personal resources where people were uncertain of themselves and others. One email recorded how the strong philosophy of the group enabled this process in difficult times. One email of September, 2004 reflecting on this described 'distinct memories of confusion, doubt and angst which almost amounted to fear' in the birthing of Websong and speaks of the 'faith in Chorus process' that it required.

Chorus strongly espouses a non-adversarial stance in articulating public issues and what needs to be brought into being. To support this and be congruent with it in terms of group processes, conflict within the group needs to be acknowledged, used and resolved well. Working through this requires lots of work and an understanding that there may still be oppositional views even if the espoused aim is inclusive. One email in April 2004 described the process:

> To articulate some of the difficult, even oppositional messages but also work alongside others to resolve them is something Chorus does. I've learnt a lot from the doing of it.

A series of emails in March 2004 about a problem experienced by one of the members of

Chorus provides a concrete example of how an aspect of Chorus philosophy may be used to rectify an individual problem. In responding to an email from one member who was feeling overwhelmed with her work in Chorus, another member reminded her that it is part of the philosophy of Chorus that 'no one woman has to make everything happen' The writer reflects that Chorus was once a positive and different experience for the member now experiencing difficulties and suggests it is important to 'make sure that positive difference stays positive, rather than Chorus being a burden'. Practical advice is then given about using others' skills.

The analysis of emails between Chorus members during the production of Websong uncovered many examples of how individual members of Chorus worked to sustain the threads of connection which are so necessary for managing without formal structures of governance. By valuing sustained, caring attention they developed a highly reflexive process that was robust enough to ensure performances of a demanding creative work, without imposing an externalized authority structure.

Governance

Working without a designated leader or defined roles is an unusual choice but it also allows the study of Chorus to be viewed in ways that go beyond current ideas of social sustainability. In complex living systems, governance is an inclusive aspect of the system, not something split off from the system and added on top. By picking up a message from within a mechanical system a governor is able to feed back a reaction to the system and this requires continuing and constant attention so that messages are correctly perceived. As with mechanical, internally governing systems, so also with natural and social self-governing systems, it is the quality of attention that determines the ability to get the message.

One email (February, 2004) articulated this governance process:

> I have a strong impression of other creative spirits incubating elements of this work and I am very keen to help it all grow in a collaborative way that is itself an expression of The Web

In this message the writer herself is acting as a 'governor' in a cybernetic sense, in that she is picking up on messages from the group and feeding back to them her own perceptions in response. It is the loving attention to the other that allows the recursive interaction that is so productive of collaborative work.

Maturana and Varela (1992) coined the word autopoetic to describe the self-generating capacity of living systems. According to cybernetic theory, systems cannot be defined satisfactorily by describing the elements which make them up. Instead it is the set of inter-component relationships which define a system's primary form and make up the core identity of the system. Maturana and Varela (1992) argue that the social process that defines human uniqueness is undermined by lack of acceptance of the other. To the extent that we see the other person and open up room for the existence of the other beside us we are able to expand our cognitive domain into the fully human.

> This act is called love, or, if we prefer a milder expression, the acceptance of the other person beside us in our daily living. This is the biological foundation of social phenomena: without love, without acceptance of others living beside us, there is no social process and, there, no humanness (Maturana and Varela, 1992:246).

The sustained and caring attention members of Chorus give to multiply interacting feedback loops – or communications with each other – is at the heart of the work they do. The outcome is seen both in their creative performances and in the building and sustaining of community. Cyberneticians see this reflexive quality as that which enables growth and change. (see, for example, Watzlawick, 1967:32)

Bateson compared human social and natural systems. In both, the individual is defined in relation to the interactions of the self with other and the self with system. For him, important meanings arise recursively, whether in nature or in human interaction. It is from patterns of communication that meanings arise – not from any cognitive model contained in a single individual's mind. The individual cannot be defined in isolation. Thus the 'self' in cybernetic thinking:

> 'is only a small part of a much larger trial-and-error system which does the thinking, acting, and deciding. . . .The 'self' is a false reification of an improperly delimited part

of this much larger field of interlocking process' (Bateson 2000:331).

Bateson was concerned with patterns of information in nature and in culture. He looked not only at interactions, but at patterns of interactions. All communication necessitates context and without context there is no meaning (Bateson 1978:13).

> . . . when you separate mind from the structure in which it is immanent, such as human relationship, the human society, or the ecosystem, you thereby embark, I believe, on fundamental error, which in the end will surely hurt you (2000:493).

Websong for many of the women in Chorus was an experience of the benefits of 'thinking, acting and deciding' within a conscious group process. By seeking input from all and fairly recognizing that which was given by all, members of Chorus were allowing their system's own capacity to produce interactively as a whole.

One person who moved far away from Canberra soon after the Websong performances made the comment through email six months later:

> As I go about my days here, the love of Chorus nestles in my heart and I hold each of you dear. I feel changed by Chorus – shaped by you too – softer on the edges I think and warmer on the inside.

The Human and the Natural Environment

A sense of the connection between renewal in the natural and the social worlds was present in the words, music, dance and poetry of Websong . The performance began with whisperings of 'the earth is our mother' and a description in words and sound of the formation of the earth. Near the end, a projected montage of images expressing renewal of the cycle of human life included sprouting buds from burnt eucalyptus trees. These were images photographed early in 2003 after devastating bush fires ravaged Canberra, the city in which Chorus members lived, and burnt over 300 homes.

As would be expected in a project titled ' Websong ' the metaphor of the Web was used as a vehicle to express ideas of connection. However, the language itself often made a poetic link between the social and the natural worlds even if this was not spelt out more explicitly. In an email discussion of the importance of the World Wide Web for supporting day to day administrative and creative work, one Chorus member referred to: 'worldwide communication processes like this that proceed through networked webs of relationship all across the lovely curving body of the earth'. Likewise, the following excerpt elaborates the theme of connection with human history, but does so with reference to a material 'earth' that is in need of repair.

> I had this idea that it was so totally amazing that there are these civilizations in so many different parts of the world that have had a connection with each other until quite recent times, these ancient, thousands and thousands of years of civilization, and they're all using these similar symbols in their stuff. It just felt to me that there was this web of connection around the world that was like this kind of invisible filament of connectedness like if you were to make a ultra thin veil that has all these kind of lines that come together and each one – they're all connected up and there are all these twisted threads and its these twisted threads that all interconnect. But what's happened to the world now is that the interconnecting is broken. It feels to me like the world has had these interconnectings around it at some stage and that somehow the knowledge has holes in it now and all the threads are broken and that is what this *Websong,* you know in Bulgaria, is about, to me anyway. It is about trying to bring those threads back – the means of connection.

By trusting the dynamic of the group process rather than working with an imposed hierarchy, members of Chorus experience something of what it means to go beyond the over-defined boundaries of the self into a creative communal process. They get to know the self as part of the 'larger field of interlocking process' (Bateson 2000:331) and the doing of this seems to invoke association with the environment and with human history. This process has been very productive for the purposes of the group. It also provides one example of the accord and awareness that need to be fostered as a basis of social sustainability.

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