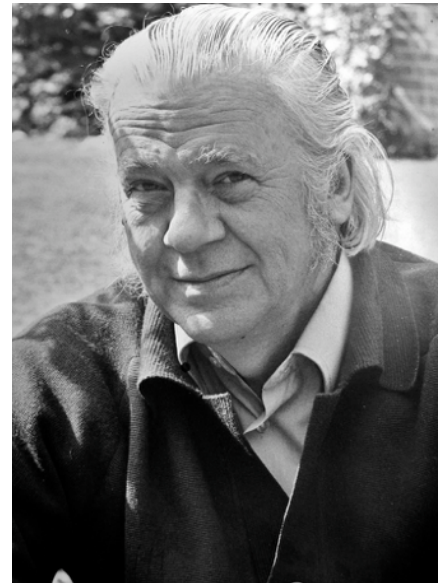


Too small to fail: ABCD & Schumacher

In last week's post I shared some thoughts on the habits of non-credentialed connectors. This week I want to explore the 7 habits of highly effective institutional radicals.

Imagine living in a world where the default position was 'that's too small to fail!'. As the realisation that 'too big to fail' equates with 'too big to jail' sinks in, I find myself encouraged by a growing narrative in support of localism and indigenous living.

The belief that civil society grows proportionate not to the extent people's needs are addressed by institutions, but by the strengths connected and expressed by citizens, is 'trending', so to speak. This trend could easily adopt Fritz Schumacher's epigram: Small is Beautiful from the book of the same name.



E.F. Schumacher. ©<http://bit.ly/1FvuqQp>

Schumacher's thinking and that of Asset-Based Community Development have much in common. So much so that in 1984 John McKnight delivered the Fourth Annual E.F. Schumacher Lecture entitled: 'John Deere and the Bereavement Counselor'.



Stanley James Hallett. ©Wikipedia

In the late 80s, Stan Hallett, a close friend and colleague of John McKnight's drew a vital comparison between the work John and his colleagues were doing in neighbourhoods and the approaches to 'intermediate or appropriate technology' that E.F. Schumacher had been promoting in the Global South.

Like John, Schumacher considered outside aid -in his case Western aid- to be woefully inadequate in unilateral terms, as the money intended for the poor typically did not filter down. Schumacher contended that what the poor needed was 'tool aid' and 'know how' that would enable them to use their local assets more effectively. For John McKnight what the poor needed was sufficient income to make the same choices as professional helpers, not professional therapy or palliative alternatives to income.

In helping to better understand what was emerging from the early appreciative inquiry across more than 300 neighbours (which I discussed in a previous blog) and how it contrasted with other neighbourhoods, Stan Hallett coined that phrase, the ‘grants economy’ – which summed up the belief that ‘if you couldn’t get a grant for it, it couldn’t be done!’ He recognised the extent to which a grants economy plants a concept of money in people’s minds, and sets a predictable pattern in motion, which is that you start out with a lot, and at the end you spend it and have nothing. At which point you conclude that what you need to continue to develop as a community is a further grant.

He also noted the contrast between the early research across the 300 neighbourhoods that John and Jody and their colleagues had undertaken and the classic community research carried out by universities. Stan said to John and his colleagues, “Your research findings don’t grow out of grants: I haven’t heard about grants in any of these neighbourhood stories. So this is the reverse of a grants economy: it’s an asset-based economy.” Clearly an asset is the opposite of a grant, hence where the name ‘asset’ comes from in Asset-Based Community Development. That which starts small and, if connected well, ends up big/bigger is an asset. It’s a multiplier of what people have, from something little to something bigger, not huge but bigger.

Assets, properly understood (outside the debt framework of the banks), are the local resources that, correctly connected, will create much more together than they do apart.

Understood this way, it becomes clear that the most important thing to attend to in community building terms are connections, since the assets are always there, though they may be hidden in plain view. But when two assets that were not connected get connected into productive relationship, that’s when things start to change.

Stan joined the Center for Urban Affairs in the early seventies. It was the era when E. F. Schumacher’s book, *Small Is Beautiful*, was very influential. *Small Is Beautiful* described “appropriate technology” as an alternative to the expensive, polluting, modern machine age options.

John McKnight, reminiscing about Stan Hallett, recalls (excerpt from my upcoming book: ‘Asset-Based Community Development: Looking Back to Look Forward’):

“Stan’s thought paralleled that of Schumacher. He created and taught us a powerful abbreviation: FESWAW. It stood for Food, Energy, Soil, Water, Air and Waste.

Stan said these were the six essentials of life, and each was interrelated with all the others. Modern technology constantly broke these relationships, thus degrading the productive use of each essential. So, “appropriate” technology was a way to use tools, so they respected and supported the primary life-giving FESWAW relationships.

At our Center, Stan, joined by his student Scott Bernstein, hatched a new organization and movement. They created the Center for Neighborhood Technology in Chicago, and it continues to be a vital center of the movement, creating Ivan Illich's "tools for conviviality" rather than modern technology that so often creates desolation, to this day.

Stan also taught us that there were two kinds of tools. His name for them was a "unitility" and a "multility." His example of a "multility" grew out of our work building a greenhouse on the top of a flat-roofed two-flat apartment on Chicago's West Side.

On the West Side, thousands of two and three-story buildings had flat roofs. Stan thought this was both wasteful and a great opportunity. He persuaded us to build, on the top of one two-story flat, a simple greenhouse that came from a kit. It was made of plastic panels and a wooden structural framework. On the roof, we learned that this simple hand-built greenhouse had many "outputs":

1. It captured the heat escaping from the roof, using it to warm the greenhouse.
2. As it captured the heat and held it on the roof-top, the greenhouse reduced the necessity for more heat in the building, thus reducing energy costs.
3. It captured the sun, thus adding to the seasonal growing capacity.
4. It produced nourishing food.
5. It produced income from the sale of surplus food.
6. Older local residents, often raised in rural areas in the South, began to come to the greenhouse and grow food. This activity often revived them, physically, mentally and spiritually, enabling more healthful lives.
7. A local school began to bring young students to learn about agriculture and energy conservation.



Electric toothbrush. ©<http://bit.ly/1EXzqZt>

In these ways, a simple tool made of basic materials produced energy savings, nourishing food, income from sales, health for seniors and education for students. Stan said it had low inputs and high outputs—a multility.

Stan's contrast with the greenhouse was an electric toothbrush. It required copper from Montana, steel from Brazil, rubber from Sumatra, oil from Saudi Arabia, costly and polluting systems to get these materials to a place of manufacture, complex machines to process and assemble the materials and hours of labor involved in all elements of the process.

Having created a machine with prodigious inputs, its output was the saved energy for a person who no longer needed to move a brush up and down, back and forth across their teeth. Stan said the electric toothbrush was the perfect modern tool with high inputs and low outputs – a untility that broke the FESWAW around the world.

It was a great lesson for me. Since then, I have always understood that our work should be post-modern seeking invention and production that is measured by two standards:

- Low inputs and high outputs.
- Respect and enhance FESWAW.

One other gift from Stan was his telling me that my work had a name. At the time, I didn't know it. Stan said that I was basically involved in promoting the associational world. An association was a small group of citizens whose joint work was a multility – low inputs and high outputs.

Every association is a set of connected people whose collective effort is based on the multiplication of the gifts and capacities of each member. Thus, it is a set of natural relationships where the sum is greater than the parts. It is the social equivalent of appropriate technology.

Then Stan urged me to read the work of Alexis de Toqueville. Toqueville's work opened an entirely new understanding of our work. After reading his book, Demoracy in America, I came to see clearly that relationships of local citizens in associations are the atomic elements of molecular democracy."



Ivan Illich. ©Wikipedia

So you can see, from the above extract, the very clear links between Stan Hallett's thinking, and Schumacher's.

Schumacher for his part, was heavily influenced by Leopold Kohr, as was Ivan Illich; central to Kohr's thinking was the idea of 'proportionality': 'proper to this place and this place alone'.

Proportionality, according to Illich, was a primary organising principle that helped people understand the cosmology of the pre-modern world. In non-mathematical terms it framed the way things and people fit together; and through their interdependence gave form and shape to each other, so that one kept the other in balance.

Many industrial technologies, simply do not enable people to live in a balanced way, quite the opposite in fact, cars and screens of various hues are just two of the more obvious examples of where this misadventure plays out.

And so publications such as *Tools for Conviviality*, *Small is Beautiful* and *Abundant Communities*, and the movements that have grown up around them are all in search of greater balance between humans and systems. They advocate for the setting of limits in the relationship between humans, their ecology and the technological world, including the techniques of professionals, beyond the industrial model for everything from classrooms to boardrooms.

Building on this critique, Asset-Based Community Development highlights the need to not alone understand the irreplaceable functions of citizens and their associations, but points to the fact that in addressing local and global challenges. There is an optimum starting point: neighbourhoods. Unsurprisingly, in a world where civic and community functions have come to be eclipsed by the multi-layered veil, which operates like the curtain that concealed the counterfeit Wizard in L. Frank Baum's novel *The Wizard of Oz*, this is an utterly uncommon position to hold.

Trends in breastfeeding since before the 1950s offer a perfect illustration of this very point. Marian Thompson along with seven of her friends, from neighbourhoods in Chicago, as young mums, started breastfeeding their children in the 1950s; they could not possibly have known what lay ahead for them, and how their actions would inspire the world.

At that time the Formula Milk Industry backed by Paediatricians and General Medical Practitioners marketed formula milk as being superior to breast milk, in providing the nutrients that babies needed to thrive. Most women were duly influenced to either stop or never start breastfeeding and purchase formula instead.



Marian Thompson. ©Wikipedia

Accordingly, over a period of years the function of breastfeeding, performed naturally for millennia by young mothers often with the support of older women, in the space of a few decades almost ceased.

When Marian and her friends sought out other mothers for support, they discovered that breastfeeding was all but a dying art. Sixty-years on and thanks to Marian and 100,000's of other women like her, breastfeeding is making a come back. The organisation that she helped found is now active in over 87 countries throughout the world. They called their movement La Leche League International.

This is a story of recovery, similar in sequence to the succession process that happens after a period of deforestation that results from mono-cropping. As with many others social movements like it, La Leche is intentionally small and local, but a proliferating movement for change nonetheless, which, like an act of revelation takes what seems to have disappeared and makes it visible and vibrant once again-by connecting that which was already there and multiplying it.

When I asked Marian how 'La Leche' had proliferated so widely and yet remained true to its hyper-local neighbourhood beginnings, she shared two nuggets of wisdom. Firstly she said 'we kept everything mother-sized', it is hard to grow big institutional frameworks when your focus is centred on feeding your children, and you can't move far from home. Secondly, she said they did not 'take on' the Formula industry; their movement was not in opposition of the Formula industry, but in favour of breastfeeding. When you are in favour of something you don't need to grow evidence to proliferate, you need to grow practice and know-how; that can only be achieved at human scale, small and local.

Surely such wisdom is worth more of our attention as we reflect on how to live on a planet that we are fast consuming to the point of ecocide? If the conclusion that small is beautiful and cannot be allowed to fail is the material of poets and romantics; not of economists and politicians, then our political, economic and environmental versions of reality urgently need more poets and romantics. But the wisdom of breastfeeding mums would be even better.

Cormac Russell