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# A Call to Engage

## Realizing the Potential of Dialogic Organization Development

By Peggy Holman

What would it mean if we knew how to successfully engage people who face intractable challenges so that our organizations and communities thrived?

Many of our social systems are facing unprecedented situations that challenge traditional approaches to change. Whether you are working with corporations, governments, or nonprofits, stories of breakdown are everywhere, leading to mergers, layoffs, and a need for new approaches to OD.

In such situations, Dialogic Organization Development (OD) offers promising practices for creative engagement. As practitioners, we can help organizations run better by engaging the people of a system in addressing complex, even conflicted situations. But that is just the beginning. We have an opportunity to spread awareness and increase capacity for habit-breaking, transformative engagement that leads to more alive organizations, families, communities, and societies. I believe we have a sacred obligation to spread the skills for engaging with challenging circumstances as widely as possible. Our future depends on it.

In what follows, I will tell you how I define Dialogic OD and why it matters—why I make such a bold statement that our future depends on it. I will describe a framework for designing dialogic engagements to make them more broadly accessible. I will end with an invitation for you to get involved in this promising development not just for traditional OD purposes but anywhere that disruption or conflict arises.

### What is Dialogic Organization Development?

Dialogic OD engages the diverse people of a system in focused yet open interactions to catalyze unexpected and lasting shifts in perspective and behavior. A basic assumption of Dialogic OD practices is that change occurs through changing the conversations in a system.

Because dialogic practices support the people who make up a system to interact creatively around complex, important issues, they generate new ideas and connections, and inspire agreements to act around emerging shared aspirations. A common result of continued use is a shift in the cultural narrative that shapes the way people see their personal and collective identities.

For more than 50 years, experiments in organizations and communities and across other types of social systems, like education and health care, have shaped dialogic methods for engaging the diverse people of a system in ways that lead to unexpected breakthroughs. Leaders in working with dialogic forms of change developed and named practices such as Open Space Technology, The World Café, Future Search, and Appreciative Inquiry (Holman, et al., 2007). In 1992, Margaret Wheatley’s groundbreaking *Leadership and the New Science* contributed to theory by connecting our changing understanding of science to human systems.

The current generation of dialogic practitioners, myself included, have built

on these dialogic practices by mixing and matching them to extend their reach into a variety of situations, for example, working online. Many of us have sought a deeper understanding of the patterns that make these practices work so that we can address each unique situation with increasing confidence that the processes will lead to productive outcomes. Further, by understanding the essence of these practices, we can make them more broadly accessible, doable without the need for extensive training.

My quest to unlock the mystery of what is involved in changing systems began in the late 1980s. I started noticing shifts in my understanding of how change occurs when using dialogic practices. Examples are in the side bar. I noticed a pattern of change through the lens of emergence—increasingly complex order self-organizing out of disorder—that helped me to understand why Dialogic OD practices work (Holman, 2012).

### A Pattern of Emergence

Emergence is nature’s way of changing, in which increasingly complex order arises from disorder. We see emergence all the time in its cousin, emergencies. What happens?

A disturbance interrupts ordinary life. In addition to natural responses, like grief or fear or anger, people differentiate—take on different tasks. For example, in an earthquake, while many are immobilized, some care for the injured, others look for food and water, a few care for the animals. Someone creates a “find your loved ones” site on the Internet. A few blaze the trails and others follow. They see what is needed and bring their unique gifts to the situation. A new order begins to arise.

This pattern of change flows as follows:

- » *Disruption* breaks apart the status quo.
- » The system *differentiates*, surfacing innovations and distinctions among its parts.
- » As different parts interact, a new, more complex *coherence* arises.

So whether you are working with an organization, a community, or other social

### Traditional and Emerging Ideas about Change (Holman et al., 2007)

In no particular order, the following table compares traditional thinking about change with ideas that support emergence. This list grew out of my work with Dialogic OD. Understanding the differences can help us to make more informed choices about how we approach change.

Traditional Ideas About Change	Emerging Ideas About Change
Difference and dissonance as problem	Diversity and dissonance as resource, with problems inviting exploration
Restrain and resist disturbance	Welcome and use disturbance in a creative dance with order
Focus on the predictable and controllable	Focus on the mysterious from a foundation of what we understand
Ensure that there are no surprises	Experiment; learn from surprises
Focus on outcomes	Focus on intentions; hold outcomes lightly
Focus on the form and its stability	Focus on intended function; work with forms as they arise and dissipate
Hierarchy	Networks containing natural, often fluid hierarchies
Visionary leadership	Shared, emergent, flexible leadership
Top-down or bottom-up	Multidirectional
Work solo	Work in community and solo, bringing our unique gifts
Pay attention to the mainstream	Pay attention to the dance between the mainstream and the margins
Build/construct/manage	Invite/open/support
Follow the plan	Follow the energy, using the plan as useful information
Manufacture	Midwife the birth of novelty and cultivate its development
Assemble the parts	Interactions among the parts form a novel whole
Design processes	Design processes and cultivate nutrient environments
Handle logistics	Cultivate welcoming conditions, including handling logistics
Strive for sustainability	Sustainability exists in a dance of dynamic tensions
Incremental shifts	Periodic leaps and incremental shifts
Classical	Classical skills that also support jazz and improvisation
Declare/advocate	Inquire/explore, using what is at the heart of our advocacy as a resource

The next time you face disruption and don’t know how to approach it, look at the left side of the table. If it reminds you of what you would ordinarily do, look at the right-hand counterpart. Perhaps you will find new insights for handling your situation. If taking the approach on the right seems like a lot of effort, consider the reasons why it might help.

Figure 1: A Pattern of Change

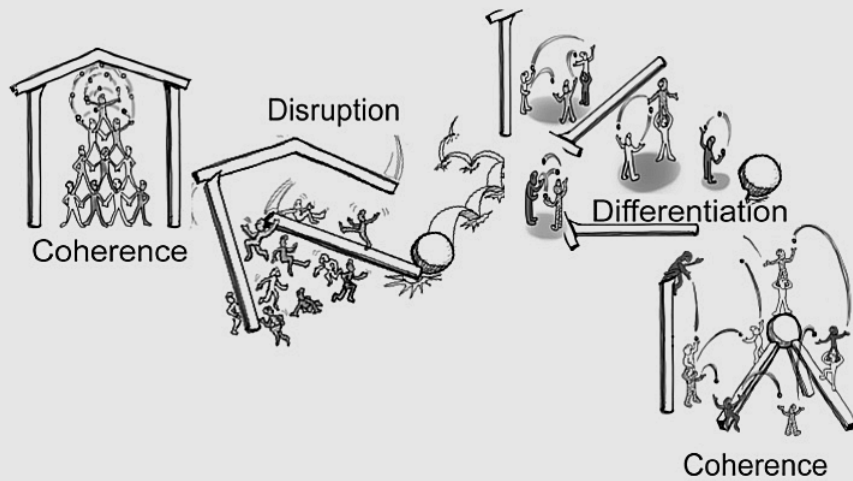


Illustration by Steven Wright, [steven@wrightmarks.com](mailto:steven@wrightmarks.com)

system, developing the capacity to work with this natural pattern of change also contributes to cultivating the consciousness and skills for people in the system to engage with structural changes in their system. My work with a biotech company highlights the shift from fixing a problem to cultivating a system capable of addressing its own challenges.

### A Biotech Begins

A biotech company was building a new facility. The regional director saw an opportunity to find synergies across departmental divides in anticipation of moving from separate buildings into a shared space. As part of the process, they convened an Open Space Technology meeting, bringing together about 100 people from all parts of the region. Open Space Technology invites people to self-organize around what they love in order to address complex, important issues (Holman, 2010). At the close of the first day of the gathering, one participant characterized the experience by saying that she had worked for the company for years and finally left out of frustration. She returned a few months ago after five years away to find that not one of the issues that had frustrated her had changed. She declared that by the time this unprecedented meeting ended, those issues would be addressed. That declaration became a rallying cry, as others echoed both her frustration and their determination to break ingrained, unproductive habits. By the end

of the event, not only had people handled long-standing issues, they developed a deeper understanding of how interconnected they were that would serve them in moving forward.

By using a dialogic practice, this company broke through ingrained habit to begin developing new relationships for shared purposes. Now imagine if more of our work left more capable, engaged systems in their wake.

### Why Dialogic Organization Development Matters

When we use dialogic practices to engage the people of a system in conversations that address their own issues, we not only solve the immediate problem, we leave behind a more evolved system, with a greater sense of direction and hope, of personal connection, and the energy and will to work across previously unbridgeable boundaries.

What would it mean to families and communities if they knew how to hold such conversations? What could it mean for our ability to govern ourselves in our red-blue divided nation?

Robert Putnam, best known for *Bowling Alone*, which looked at the decline of social capital in the US (2001), has more recently found that other things being equal, *more* diversity in a community is associated with *less* trust both between and within ethnic groups (2007). Given the increasing diversity not just in the US but also across the globe, our collective

well-being depends on our learning to use our differences as a resource. Enter the practices of Dialogic Organization Development, which thrive on diversity.

While Putnam's research implies that increasing diversity in our neighborhoods could diminish our capacity to work together, Dialogic OD offers a path to a different and promising outcome. We can choose to face our seemingly intractable challenges by coalescing into a vibrant, inclusive society characterized by creative interactions among diverse people. In many ways, this path is counterintuitive. It breaks with traditional thinking about change, including the ideas that it occurs top-down and that it follows an orderly plan, one step at a time. We do not control emergence. Nor can we fully predict how it arises. It can be threatening, intense, overwhelming. Yet, through dialogic practices, we can engage it, confident that unexpected and valuable breakthroughs can occur.

### Benefits of Using Dialogic OD to Engage Emergence

Although specific outcomes from Dialogic OD are unpredictable, by engaging with it some benefits are foreseeable. Stories from Journalism That Matters (JTM), an initiative that convenes conversations among the diverse people who are shaping the emerging news and information ecosystem, illustrates likely benefits:

**Individually, we are stretched and refreshed.** We feel more courageous and inspired to pursue what matters to us. With a myriad of new ideas and confident of the support of mentors, collaborators, and fans, we act.

At an early Journalism That Matters gathering, a recent college graduate arrived with the seed of an idea: putting a human face on international reporting for US audiences. At the meeting, she found support for the idea. Experienced people coached her and gave her entrée to their contacts. Today, the Common Language Project is thriving, having received multiple awards.

**New and unlikely partnerships form.** When we connect with people whom we do not normally meet, sparks may fly. Creative conditions make room for our differences, fostering lively and productive interactions.

A technology-averse veteran investigative reporter was teamed with a young digital journalist. They created a multimedia website for a story based on a two-year investigation. Not only did the community embrace the story, but the veteran is pursuing additional interactive projects. And the digital journalist is learning how to do investigative reporting.

**Breakthrough projects surface.** Experiments are inspired by interactions among diverse people.

The Poynter Institute, an educational institution serving the mainstream media, was seeking new directions because its traditional constituency was shrinking. Because Poynter co-hosted a JTM gathering, a number of staff members participated. They listened broadly and deeply to the diverse people present. An idea emerged that builds on who they are and takes them into new territory: supporting the training needs of entrepreneurial journalists.

**Community is strengthened.** We discover kindred spirits among a diverse mix of strangers. Lasting connections form, and a sense of relationship grows. We realize that we share an intention—a purpose or calling guided by some deeper source of wisdom. Knowing that our work serves not just ourselves but a larger whole increases our confidence to act.

As a community blogger who attended a JTM conference put it, “I’m no longer alone. I’ve discovered people asking similar questions, aspiring to a similar future for journalism. Now I have friends I can bounce ideas off of, knowing we share a common cause.”

**The culture begins to change.** With time and continued interaction, a new narrative of who we are takes shape.

When Journalism That Matters began, we hoped to discover new possibilities for a struggling field so that it could better serve democracy. As traditional media, particularly newspapers, began failing, the work became more vital. We see an old story of journalism dying and provide a place for it to be mourned. We also see the glimmers of a new and vital story being born. In it, journalism is a conversation rather than a lecture. Stories inspire rather than discourage their audience. Journalism That Matters has become a vibrant and open conversational space where innovations emerge. New language, such as news ecosystem—the information exchange among the public, government, and institutions that can inform, inspire, engage, and activate—makes it easier to understand what is changing. People say, “I didn’t know I could be effective without a big organization behind me. Now I do.”

These experiences show that working with emergence using Dialogic OD practices

can create great initiatives, the energy to act, a sense of community, and a greater view of the whole—a collectively intelligent system at work.

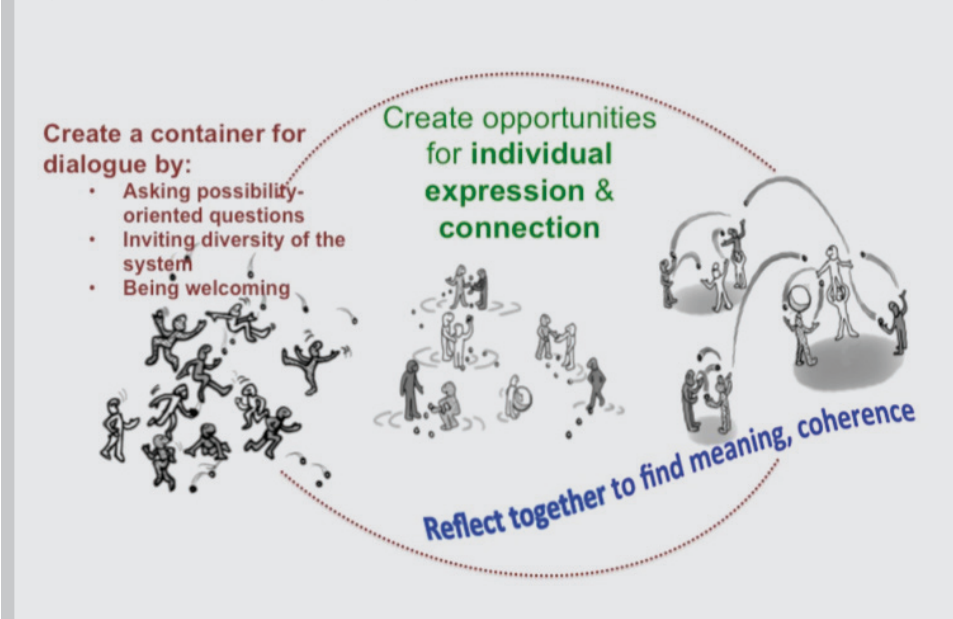
As more people engage emergence, something fundamental changes about who we are, what we are doing, how we are with each other, and perhaps what it all means. In the process, we tear apart familiar and comfortable notions about how change works. We bring together unlikely bedfellows and re-imagine and re-create our organizations, communities, and social systems so that they serve us better.

**At the Heart of Dialogic Organization Development**

If working with emergence through dialogic practices is a pathway to success, how do we do it? Using dialogic practices like Appreciative Inquiry, Future Search, or others named above, is an excellent place to start. My hope is that as OD practitioners embrace dialogic practices, they extend the skills for hosting conversations to people who bring them into a myriad of settings: home, church, community centers, and more. Change is simply too important to be left solely in the hands of professionals.

I offer my most current framing of three simple acts for designing dialogic

Figure 2: Actions for Dialogic Engagement



engagements, along with a story, in the hopes that it gives you the context to jump in.

### Creating a Container for Dialogue

All change begins with disturbing the status quo. We may find it positive: a promotion, losing weight, a new baby. We may experience it with dread: losing a job, a contract, a life. Any disruption, because it is disturbing, can lead to change. Dialogic practices help us develop a positive relationship with disruption because they offer an aikido move in dealing with it. By embracing disruption, we become hosts for welcoming who and what needs to interact in order for the differences that make a difference to emerge.

As hosts, our work is not to intervene, but rather to create a container—hospitable space for working with whatever arises. Three actions weave spacious containers for engaging with conflict and complexity. They are:

- » Asking possibility-oriented questions;
- » Inviting diversity; and
- » Being welcoming.

### Asking Possibility-oriented Questions

*How do we inspire explorations that lead to positive action?*

If your first impulse when facing disaster is to ask questions that surface images of a positive future, your chances of making it through upheaval increase. It kept psychiatrist Viktor Frankl alive, as he continually sought meaning even in a concentration camp during the Holocaust (1997).

Ambitious, possibility-oriented questions are attractors, drawing diverse people who care. They disrupt by focusing on opportunities for something better, more meaningful. A general question is “Given all that has happened, what is possible now?” This question acknowledges the present without making it bad or wrong. It focuses on the future, setting the stage for a productive inquiry. If we do not know the answer and are genuinely curious, we have got the beginnings of a great question.

Bold, affirmative questions carry us through chaos into creativity. They

mobilize change by helping us to envision our dreams and aspirations. Such positive images generate positive actions (Cooper-rider, 2000).

As important as the questions that we ask, is who engages in exploring them.

### Inviting Diversity

*How can we include the true complexity of the situation?*

Dialogic OD encourages people to look beyond habitual definitions of who and

between a screaming mob and a circle of peace. Though we cannot see welcome, we can sense it. Think of that small voice that informs you when you enter a place whether to relax or watch out.

The broader the diversity of people and perspectives, the more important a healthy container is. A welcoming space supports people to participate fully. It cues us about how much to reveal, how deep we are willing to go. When the environment supports expressions that might be considered

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what makes up a system. Think of protesters outside the doors of power. What would happen if they were invited into an exploratory dialogue? Making space for different perspectives while in a healthy container opens the way for creative engagement.

How do we decide whom to invite?

The simple answer: those who care. Future Search creators Marv Weisbord and Sandra Janoff suggest inviting all who “ARE IN”: those with *authority*, *resources*, *expertise*, *information*, and *need* (2010).

Inviting can be time-consuming and challenging. It involves being receptive to unfamiliar perspectives, going to unfamiliar places, and cultivating relationships with people different from you.

Creating a robust container involves cultivating a spirit of welcome, for whom-ever and whatever shows up.

### Being Welcoming

*How do we cultivate conditions for the best possible outcomes?*

Welcoming fosters civility. Engaging a diverse mix of people is simpler when they sense that they belong, right from the start. Welcoming conditions make the difference

disruptive in other settings, disturbances tend to show up as less toxic. In welcoming spaces, people take charge of their situation, compelling facilitators to move out of the way and traditional leaders to contribute as one part of a larger system.

Creating a welcoming container is as important as setting a useful agenda. How do we make intentions clear? What is welcome? What of our history needs to be shared? What of our aspirations? How about physical space—what messages does it send? The questions are endless. All we can do is our best to discern what matters given the situation. The good news: what we miss will show up as a disruption. By embracing it, we learn, adjust, and continue evolving.

The work of cultivating a great container is a bit party host, a bit stage manager, a bit den mother, and yet none of these. Like many relational skills, when practiced well, it is invisible.

Having bounded the space of disruption with possibility-oriented questions, been mindful about inviting the diversity of the system, and created a welcoming space, what do you do with it?

## Creating Opportunities for Individual Expression and Connection

*How do individual passions contribute to stronger communities?*

With a container created, no matter what dialogic practice, when successful, it creates a sense of spaciousness for divergence. For many, this space of differentiation seems messy and chaotic. It is also ripe for creative endeavor, for experiments to occur, for connections to be made. The heart of the work of Dialogic OD is crafting activities that invite individual expression and make room for unexpected connections.

Dialogic practices that thrive brilliantly support the counterintuitive insight of spaces for differentiation: pursuing what matters to us individually enables us to discover commonalities in our mutual needs and longings. Sadly, most of us were taught that pursuing what we love is selfish. So we set aside what makes us different and unique, and sacrifice ourselves for the common good. In practice, this choice often leads to strong egos, and unfulfilled, unhappy people who secretly take out their resentment on others.

In contrast, by embracing what we love, deeper meaning trumps ego needs, and sparks openness to others. We discover that what is most personal is universal. We are no longer alone but part of some larger whole. Something shifts. “I” see myself as part of a larger “we.” We relate not just to each other but also to the whole. A social system—a community—emerges, with its own identity, distinct from the individuals in it. Yet we share a common story, common intentions. Knowing that, in essence, we want the same things, differences cease to be obstacles. They become creative pathways to innovations that contain what is vital to each of us and all of us. Our capacity and desire to listen to each other grows. Our uniqueness turns from disruption into creative contribution.

As practitioners of Dialogic OD, once differentiation is underway, we can test for convergence, where a new coherence arises.

## Reflect Together to Find Meaning, Coherence

*What is arising now?*

Reflecting helps meaning to coalesce. It is listening’s mirror, making visible what we sense. It supports us in stepping out of the flow of activity. It helps us to notice larger patterns taking shape. Reflective questions help us perceive what is converging. What are we learning? What surprised us? What is meaningful? What simple rules—patterns, assumptions, principles—are surfacing? What can now be named? Buddhists say that you cannot predict enlightenment, but practicing meditation prepares the way. Reflecting prepares us to notice shifts even as we experience them.

I use two complementary definitions for *reflecting*. The paragraph above describes reflection as sensing patterns arising. This form of reflection involves actively seeking coherence. Reflection also means being a mirror for others—to repeat their words or describe their feelings.

In this second form, reflecting is listening going deep, bearing witness for another. Reflecting back another’s words and feelings helps them to hear themselves. It can get underneath ineffective expressions—shouting, whining, bullying—to deeper longings buried in their angst. Supporting others to hear themselves clarifies the heart of their cry. Perhaps it helps them to realize what they wanted to express for the first time. Feeling fully heard frees them to listen to others.

Both forms of reflecting help us to notice our differences and stay connected, discovering a larger, more complex picture forming from our diverse views. That bigger picture is often an unexpected, coherent pattern that could not have arisen without deep expressions at the heart of our differences. A new, wiser, higher-order coherence emerges.

Through the simple acts of creating a container, creating opportunities for individual expression and connection, and reflecting together to find meaning and coherence, Dialogic OD helps the conversation of a social system to change.

## A Story of Communities in Change

As Putnam’s research on increasing community diversity and decreasing trust makes clear, perhaps nowhere is the need for new conversations as great as in our communities. The work of the Community Learning Exchange (CLE)—<http://www.communitylearningexchange.org> offers a promising counter trend. CLE is a network of resilient local communities, vibrant organizations, and active change agents who share local wisdom and collective leadership approaches with each other so they can be more effective in addressing critical social issues. Funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, CLE spreads community wisdom about collective leadership for community change across the U.S.

From reimagining education to understanding the roots of trauma in Native American communities, CLE has grown the capacity for communities to make themselves stronger. In 2011, I worked with CLE to bring together 35 thought leaders for an inquiry into the role of public education in U.S. society. Our diverse planning group composed the question, “What is our narrative of public education?” as part of creating a container for our work. We invited the diversity of the system, people who cared about public education—students and teachers, policy makers and teachers of teachers, drawn from public and private education. We met at the Highlander Center, a place that played an important role in preparing leaders of the civil rights movement, such as Rosa Parks. Throughout the session, the space itself worked on us, as one of the hosts continually brought us back to a story of Miles Horton, a founder of Highlander, asking Rosa Parks, “so what are you going to do when you get home?” to which she replied, “I don’t know, but I’m going to do something.”

In this container, we, as hosts, used a variety of practices to support differentiation. We opened with a circle process for people to introduce themselves through stories of their own experiences with education. Circle process elicits deep speaking and listening that seems to arise from the form itself—a ring of chairs and a clearly

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defined purpose—inspiring collective wisdom and action (Baldwin & Linnea, 2010). Participants then connected in a World Café to discuss the current narrative of education. The World Café fosters strategic dialogue by creating a living network of connected small-group conversations focused on shared “questions that matter” in order to foster the emergence of collective intelligence and committed action (Brown & Isaacs, 2005). The next day we used Open Space Technology to explore possibilities. We wove the history of Highlander itself into the meeting, drawing power from the rich history and high stakes of its work.

As the second day ended and the last day began, our questions moved from opening explorations to reflecting on what had emerged among us. The group broke into trios to discern an emerging narrative for public education that drew from all they had experienced. Through their reflections, we defined key features of a new narrative. And because people were each going back to their own worlds, we ran coaching circles, in which they could test their ideas for action with peers as sounding boards. By the end of the gathering, everyone walked away with a clearer, shared perspective about the role of public education.

Each person also left with new connections that continue to lead to opportunities for synergy, as participants call upon each other while they take their own next steps. I am now working with several participants on another education related undertaking.

When dealing with a topic as complex as the U.S. educational system, the answers do not come overnight. Yet with each new connection, each new convening, threads of a new narrative for public education forms. Without a central authority in

charge, the system itself changes as the narrative among the networks of relationships evolves.

### In Closing

Throughout our social systems, a new story is arising that works creatively with complexity, conflict, and upheaval. The practices of Dialogic OD are ideally suited for helping us to find our way in these changing conditions. Rooted in the skills of everyday conversation, we all know something about dialogic practices. They are our birthright. When issues are complex, stakes are high, and emotions are right below the surface, these practices help us engage with each other. Broadly deployed, dialogic OD can help us to re-envision our organizations, our communities, and the systems where we live and work—health care, education, politics, economics, and more. So join me in not only practicing Dialogic OD, but also sharing the practices with others. Together, we can change the world.

*This article is dedicated to Harrison Owen, creator of Open Space Technology. Who, among other things, opened a rabbit hole that I fell through. It continues to be an adventure.*

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Peggy Holman has helped explore a nascent field of social technologies that engage whole systems of people from organizations and communities in creating their future. The current edition of *The Change Handbook* profiles 61 change processes. Her award-winning *Engaging Emergence: Turning Upheaval into Opportunity*, dives beneath these processes to describe patterns, principles, and practices to guide us through turbulent times. Holman is on the faculty at American University’s MSOD program. She can be reached at [peggy@peggyholman.com](mailto:peggy@peggyholman.com).

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