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Application Essay

My first contact with the term “Systems Theory” was during a year-long program, *The Power and Limitations of Dialogue*, at The Evergreen State College. One of the books in this program was Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline*. The discussion of learning organizations in that book was especially interesting to me because of an experience while working as a team manager for the technical staff at an Internet service provider several years earlier. When I took over the duties of team manager, I worked to flatten the hierarchy and promote the idea that the department was a continual and accelerating learning environment. Reading the book reminded me that one of the upper management had asked me if I had read Senge's work because of similarities to what I was attempting. There is a strong connection for me between my prior personal experience and the new language and granularity with which I could speak of that experience gained by reading Senge.

In some sense, I feel strongly that this is an example of how learning structure and concepts after having gathered experience is inherently connecting, whereas learning the structure and concepts prior to experience is inherently disconnecting. Connecting is an awareness of being a member of a group or community, the need to associate the self with something greater than just the self. Disconnecting is the process of individuation and the need for self-worth as a distinct individual. I started to call this the “Two Brains” conflict after the two minds in the work of Lawrence LeShan¹. In this analysis, experience prior to learning the concepts and language with which to describe the experience is an inherently connecting influence that strengthens shared history. This mutuality helps the individual to maintain the memory of shared co-created experience within a community of others. Even more importantly, the direct co-creation of experience is a strong associative emotional bond to other individuals.²

¹Lawrence LeShan explains these two modes of human thought in the article *Why We Love War*.

²The work of Dr. V. S. Ramachandran demonstrates the way in which the lack of an emotional connection can override intellectual determination. He shows that the neurobiological structures of perception and

One of the primary questions I examined in the study of dialogue is how to maintain the space of dialogue in the presence of those with inimical motives toward that dialogue. Many of the conceptual tools available did not feel complete. Primary they were all structuralist and ignored important issues of dynamic complexity, cause and effect. Melding ideas from Marshall Rosenberg's *Non-Violent Communication*,³ Lawrence LeShan's *Why We Love War*, and the conflict models from the mediation and conflict resolution training required a systemic dimension. By the end of the year, another student in class and I had developed a conceptual tool, a mental model, that appears to provide useful leverage toward understanding intra-, inter- and extra-personal conflict and change.⁴ As a team we presented this work to the other program participants and developed a very basic link between Myers-Brigg Type Indicators through a survey on campus.⁵

One of the fundamental components of this attempt at systemic conflict analysis is the way that individuals act like communities of interests and how communities act like individuals. The individual experience of conflict and change management is both a personal journey and a process of existing in a community of others. The community experience of conflict and change management is a community journey and a process of attempting to create alignment, a systemic individual, if you will. There is a cause and effect relationship that cannot be adequately explained by structuralist personality types because these do not explain the interconnected and interdependent way in which the individual-in-conflict and the community-in-conflict are in a shared higher order conflict with each other. Clearly, people are not archetypes, but the roles that people assume can be. These roles can determine behaviour in a unrecognized system of change. I hope to focus on the further development, examination and evaluation of this theoretical model in the future.

emotion are essentially connected. When this connection is dysfunctional, the lack of an emotional response tied to perception can cause an individual to fail in recognizing their own parents, for example, and to believe them to be imposters.

³Marshall Rosenberg's use of the jackal and giraffe is introduced in *Compassionate Communication*.

⁴For reference, see the safari presentation is available online: *The Safari: In Search of the Elephant*
<http://www.arlecchino.org/ildottore/palod/The_Safari_-_12mar03.html>

⁵The survey conclusion is online: *Myers Briggs and Safari Journey Experiment*
<http://arlecchino.org/ildottore/palod/paper_-_safari_and_myers_briggs.html>

After the intense focus on dialogue, I wanted to examine specific historical and current examples conflict. I was able to extend this in the program *Dissent, Injustice and the Making of America*. I was able to investigate historical political, social and judicial conflicts during the Early Republic and Constitutional period of the United States.⁶ I was able to extend this through the early 20th century to include labor and gender equality struggles. By looking at specific examples, I worked to surface systemic ways in which dissent, as conflicting ideology, is normalized by the dominant narrative and ways that dissent accelerates to meet the challenge.⁷ This raises an important question of how competition between cultural narratives is resolved and points out that the marginalization of plurality is a potentially dangerous side effect of having a dominant narrative.

One of the areas of investigation that I was not able to explore was the way in which comparative legal systems are cultural answers to questions of individual and community truth. Legal traditions are cultural world views actualized and that they vary represents specific and unique answers to conflict resolution. The variances and invariances of these traditional systems, both in a historical and spatial comparison, are a tool to explore dangers and opportunity present in conflict.

Another area of examination is the way in which the social and economic transformations of the modern era have created a lattice of disconnect between individuals and communities. On a macroeconomic level, this is a conflict between the Core, Semi-periphery and the Periphery that is exemplified in the visceral and deep social and economic wounds created over the issue of globalization.⁸ On a microeconomic level, this is a struggle for advantage and benefit between individuals living in community, a struggle for dominance over shared history comprised of time, space and value. The importance of thinking systemically about the way that global issues affect communities and businesses cannot be overstated, but it should also be clear that the influence

⁶Of particular interest on this topic is Saul Cornell's *The Other Founders*.

⁷My final paper for that program is available online: *Analysis of dissent, injustice and the making of the United States: an induction from vitriol to victory; a deduction from justice to jurisprudence*. <<http://www.arlecchino.org/ildottore/diamoa/final.html>>

⁸The world-system theory analysis in William McCormick's *America's Half-Century* was my introduction.

of conflict extends even to the individual level. The choices communities and individuals make in the face of conflicts that they cannot analyze are choices made at the edge of a fearsome precipice.

From the brochure, the overall vision for the Center for Creative Change is one that "prepares students to envision and lead effective, sustainable change in organizations, businesses and communities." There is a strong element of community, real world interaction in "action research projects." I am very interested in issues of political philosophy and economy as well as social movements and dissent. These are all systemic features of living history and an examination of these is to no small part an attempt to get at surfacing the systems where, as Martin Luther King said, "racism, economic exploitation and militarism are all tied together."⁹ This is about how these world-systems relate to systems of communities and individuals. Of course, Peter Senge's work points out that the business world is also related and important in this relationship.

The Antioch program, in general, offers me the opportunity to do academic and real world investigation of change and change management. My specific goal is the acquisition of systemic language and concepts for analysis and synthesis. Although somewhat circular, I want to develop a stronger systems framework to examine systemic frameworks. This is a recursive project to concretize philosophy as a systemic framework, matched with the willingness to exhume, examine, evaluate and potentially exchange frameworks for understanding systems.

My activities in mediation and dialogue facilitation are examples of bring this into the real world. Also, for the last 4 years, I have been working in non-profits to develop a library automation system for underfunded and rural libraries that brings tools for community information systems to areas, and people, that have previously been unable to take advantage of advanced digital information access. I have also been doing preparatory academic work in economics, political philosophy, political and legal history. These are all related skills rooted in community, and

⁹This is from a powerful and still disturbingly relevant speech by Martin Luther King in a 1967 speech, *Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence*.

conflict and change management. There's an important element of real-world direct action, in the sense of specific experiential work, in all of these projects that is reciprocal to the intellectual or academic work.

In reference to skills and experiences, I have provided a work history of my last 10 years and a list of some significant community activities to supplement the transcripts of my academic career.

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