The New Johari Window #7:
Complexity and the Postmodern Condition

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While social philosophers, historians and organizational consultants might not be able to agree upon much, they inevitably acknowledge that relationships over the years have tended to become more complex. One of the obvious reasons for this complexity is the massive increase in the size of the human population on this planet, which, in turn, leads to increasingly dense human populations in all areas of the world. The increasing density of human population is not simply a matter of population growth, it also has to do with a remarkable dynamic that is to be found in most systems—what many theorists now label the *strange attractor* phenomenon.

Strange Attractors

This dynamic process of attraction concerns the tendency for all elements in a complex system to cluster around some central point. There are forces, entities and events in many systems that attract other forces, entities or events. One of the primary contributors to contemporary complexity theory, Ilya Pergogine, observed in 1984 that larvae in a specific insect population will tend to distribute widely when there is low density (small number of larvae in a specifically defined space), but will tend to cluster as the density increases and to form multi-clusters with very high density.[i] There is a similar tendency for people to cluster as they increase in number. The noted sociologist and social theorist, Emile Durkheim was one of the first to observe the strange attractor phenomenon as it operates in human societies.[ii] He noted that as the number of people inhabiting a particular area of land tends to increase, there is a

tendency for these people not to spread out evenly (which would provide each person with the maximum amount of available space), but rather for these people to cluster together (to form villages and, at a later point, cities).

Why did this clustering occur? Several good reasons have been offered. Teilhard de Chardin suggested many years ago that people had two options as they slowly populated the earth and began to bump up against others of the same species.[iii] They could continue moving about in a nomadic life style and face ongoing conflict with other isolated, nomads, or they could establish a cooperative relationship with a small group of other nomads and settle down in one spot. They could shift from a hunter-gatherer mode to a premodern mode of agriculture and the extraction or cultivation of other natural resources. Riane Eisler has suggested another choice following increased population density. This is the choice between invasion, domination, and ongoing conflict, on the one hand, and respect for boundaries, cooperation and stability, on the other hand.[iv] This critical choice between domination and partnership is still being made every day in our corporations and governments.

Even more recently, researchers and theorists on interpersonal and small group dynamics have applied this concept of strange attractor to our understanding of human interactions. Holly Arrow, Joseph McGrath and Jennifer Berdahl have suggested that small groups (and by extension one could include interpersonal relationships) tend to be animated by several different kinds of attractors.[v] One kind, the stable point attractor, represents some compelling force (goal, event, story and so forth) that keeps pulling members of the group or relationship closer together over time. This is a very robust attractor that tends to produce predictable and relatively simple dynamics in a group or interpersonal relationship. This type of attractor system is represented in a very old relationship that is centered on one feature—such as the caring for a business or family, or the shared commitment to a specific value or life purpose. While this type of relationship is often quite stable, it is also quite vulnerable. What happens to the relationship when the business is closed or the children leave home? What happens to the relationship when the shared values or purposes are fully realized or when there is profound

failure? Where is the "glue" in the relationship when these uni-dimensional attractors are no longer present?

Apparently, these stable point attractor systems are not common in most contemporary groups (or relationships). Rather, we find that most groups and relationships are better represented by what Arrow, McGrath and Berdahl identify as alternative equilibrium attracter systems. These systems involve multiple attractors that create highly complex, volatile dynamics in a group or relationship. In some instances these alternative equilibrium attractor systems are based in dilemmas. Each attractor pulls people back and forth between conflicting or contradictory attractions (for example, between intimacy and independence). Neither attractor is strong enough to pull the group or relationship completely to its side. In the case of a second type of alternative equilibrium system—called the reversible or switching attracter system—both attractors are very successful in pulling in the group or interpersonal relationship. According to Arrow and her colleagues, this system moves groups and relationships back and forth between two contrasting points (for example, between a state of normal functioning and a state of crisis).

Arrow and her two colleagues don't stop here. They identify yet another type of attractor system, this being the sequential or developmental system. The group or relationship moves through a predictable sequence of steps, each step being based on a single attractor or cluster of compelling attractors. The Interpersonal Needs system offered by Will Schutz is descriptive of this type of system. At one stage in a relationship, the need for inclusion operates as an attractor, while at a later stage the need for control is prominent and at a third stage, openness is the primary attractor. Finally, these theorists describe a fourth type of alternative equilibrium attractor system that is periodic or cyclical in nature. A group or relationship has a series of "seasons" through which it moves in a regular and predictable manner. Each "season" has its own primary attractor. Thus, two people who have been married for many years may go through periodic phases of growing distant from one another, this leading to a crisis and ultimately to a change in some dimension of the relationship and, finally, to a

renewed commitment to the relationship (a "remarriage").[vi]

Each of these forms of attraction suggests a unique type of interaction between the parties involved in the human interaction. While we cannot yet trace out all of the implications of these differing types of attractor systems, we can bring what we do know about these systems to bear in addressing the inherent complexity of interpersonal systems.

Complexity and the Johari Window

More subtle definitions of self in all four quadrants is required in a highly complex interpersonal environment. For instance, with specific regard to Quad 2 (Opaque Self), the postmodern condition suggests that we may be overwhelmed with great cognitive and emotional complexity and with a saturating array of potential selves. We are not blind—rather we are overwhelmed. We are provided with too much information and too many contradictions, but this doesn't prevent us from addressing this information and these contradictions as they relate to our sense of self. We may need to keep things simple (Lasch's minimal self) or at least we need to be selective. We might not need additional feedback (Quadrant Two). We already have enough coming in.

This postmodern condition suggests that there is a critical need for discernment. We must be careful in choosing the type of feedback we wish to receive and the people from whom we want feedback. The postmodern world may no longer be a setting for the naïve openness that was proposed during the 1960s and 1970s. Part of our second quadrant may remain opaque because we choose, at a specific time and place and in relationship with a specific person or group, to focus on a certain section of our second quadrant. Other sections will remain unattended until there is a more appropriate time, place and/or relationship for receiving relevant feedback.

What about Quad Three (The Protected Self)? The complex, overwhelming and saturating world in which we live includes a rich, but challenging interpersonal heterogeneity. We are

never sure *what* and *how much* to disclose to other people, given that they do not necessarily share with us a common heritage, value-system or even language. Our third quadrant is understandable protected in a postmodern world, for we need to be careful about what we disclose to other people, given that our disclosure could be inappropriate, misunderstood or counterproductive. Compounding this challenge is the prospect of selecting from among a richly diverse body of information residing in our third quadrant. If our first quadrant is saturated, then there is no reason to believe that our third quadrant is any less saturated. It's not just a matter of telling other people about our life—it's a matter of deciding which of our many "lives" to describe. Which story do we tell—not do we or do we not tell our story.

So what do we do? We can diminish the size and scope of quadrant three—moving toward Lasch's minimal self. We can spend many hours deliberating about what is our "authentic" self. Lasch's social-critical (and Continental school) colleague, Richard Sennett suggests that we have become very careful about what we share with other people. We save our "real" self for private settings (when we are at home), while we offer a mask or persona (personality) in "public."[vii] Putting these two analyses together, we would seem to be caught in a dilemma. We are encouraged to be more open and share our private self in public setting; yet, we must deliberate about what is our true "private" self versus what is our false "public" self. This deliberation, in turn, leads to caution and to reticence about sharing any aspect of self in public.

We fail to realize that many selves are "authentic" in certain times and places and in relationship to certain people. We can share many aspects of our "private" self in public settings—we have only to choose which aspects are appropriate in which settings. This is the selective self that seems to be associated with maturity in our society. These are important choices to make—and the movement from Quad Three to Quad One is particularly important and difficult in a postmodern world. By reducing the disclosure of third quadrant content, in search of authenticity, we may be diminishing not just our sense of self, but also the quality of relationships that we have with other people (disclosure being an important aspect of this

quality). Eventually, Quad Three content will tend to dry up (or move to Quad Four) if it is not shared. Thus, when we are stingy about Quad Three and obsessed with always presenting some sort of carefully coifed and "authentic" Quad Three, we risk the lose of the richly diverse material located in this quadrant.

The challenges become even more complex as we turn to Quad Four and the shadow functions and unconscious dynamics of this quadrant. We don't have sufficient time in our postmodern world to sort through the complexity of the three accessible quadrants—so how do we ever find time to plunge into the labyrinth called Quad Four? Isn't this even more complex than the other three quadrants, and isn't there likely to be even greater ambiguity and inconsistency? In his analysis of the minimal self and the obsessive preoccupation with discovering something about our unconscious life (through psychotherapy, personal growth groups, and so forth), Christopher Lasch offers an even more telling concern:[viii]

> The ethic of self-preservation and psychic survival . . . reflects the conviction—as much a projection of inner anxieties as a perception of the way things are—that envy and exploitation dominate even the most intimate relations. . . . The ideology of personal growth, superficially optimistic, radiates a profound despair and resignation. It is the faith of those without faith.

Lasch is suggesting that our exploration of Quad Four may be no more anchored than our quest, in previous times, for some spiritual verity. We believe that our unconscious life will somehow provide the Holy Grail of enlightenment. Our faith in the wisdom of the unconscious life becomes a secularized version of spirituality—"the faith of those without faith."

How should we respond to these telling critiques of Quad Four exploration? What makes Quad Four worth the time and effort? What does Quad Four have to offer that is something more than a secular substitute for faith? We offer in response to these critiques a quote from Albert Einstein that led off Luft's description of Quadrant Four in the original presentation of the Johari Window:[ix]

> The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science. Whoever does not know it and can no longer wonder, no longer marvel, is as good as dead, and his eyes are dimmed. It was the experienced of mystery - even if mixed with fear - that engendered religion. A knowledge of something we cannot penetrate, our perceptions of the profoundest reason and the most radiant beauty, which only in their most primitive forms are accessible to our minds - it is this knowledge and this emotion that constitutes true religiosity; in this sense, and in this alone, I am a deeply religious man. - Albert Einstein, *Living Philosophies*

Einstein seems to be suggesting that any mystery in the world is worth exploring because of its beauty, its compelling nature and the wisdom it contains. Many years ago, one of Einstein's colleagues, Michael Polanyi, the remarkable Nobel Prize-winning scientist and philosopher, was asked in a seminar how he knew something was "true."[x] This question was appropriate in this setting, for Polanyi was in the midst of debunking many so-called "scientific" assumptions about "objectivity" and "truth." Polanyi paused for a moment after receiving the question. He then indicated that he knew something was "true" when it surprised him, when it didn't fit neatly into any of his preconceived categories. Another person attending the seminar then commented that Polanyi seemed to be describing the experience of confronting God ("Jahweh"). Polanyi was apparently taken aback by this observation and connection. He found it to be quite profound and gasped with recognition. He noted that for many years he had left his own Jewish heritage behind him. Yet, here it is, coming forth once again to influence his fundamental assumptions about the nature of "truth."

This is what Quad Four is all about—the surprising truths about ourselves that are waiting to be revealed by ourselves or by other people. It's not that other people know what's in our fourth quadrant. Rather, it is an inadvertent comment that provokes or evokes the insight (sight inward) within us. Alternatively, it is feedback (Quad Two) about one aspects of our

behavior that provokes or evokes something else in us. It might instead be the act of revealing something about ourselves (Quad Three) (such as Polanyi's definition of "truth") that solicits a comment or observation by someone else—which, in turn, leads to our own internal-sighting from Quad Four (such as one of Polanyi's sources in his definition of truth). I would suggest that this is the fundamental reason for exploration of Quad Four in the midst of a complex and demanding postmodern life. It is in this quadrant that we are most likely to gain access to something that might in some way be mysterious, surprising and "true." Quad Four contains information about our self that is unvarnished, de-constructed, minimally-manipulated and compelling. It is certainly worth a glance.

When we do, finally, turn to our open quadrant (Quad One), we are faced with the prospects of a saturated or overwhelmed self. We become obsessed with self and must decide whether to diminish our sense of self or become more selective about it. We withdraw from other people in order to reflect on self and figure out what we want to do next. This retreat is quite understandable—and essential in our complex, unpredictable and turbulent world. Yet, the Johari Window points us to an even more important truth about self—and in particular it points differently to the self in each of the four quadrants. We ultimately find out more about all four quadrants by interacting with other people—not by withdrawing from them. We get out of an obsession with an increasingly isolated and diminished self by returning to the wisdom of Harry Stack Sullivan—a psychiatrist who courageously sought to interact with and relate to the most challenging of people—the schizophrenic. Sullivan suggests that "self" is always defined in relationship to other people—to interpersonal context. He proposes that "*personality is the relatively enduring pattern of recurrent interpersonal situations which characterize a human life*."[xi]

According to Sullivan, who we are is determined in large part by the interpersonal settings in which we find ourselves—or more precisely by the nature of the interpersonal relationships in which we engage. Our personality shifts as a function of the people with whom we relate. Thus, for Sullivan, there is no enduring, independently situated personality; rather there are

"enduring patterns of recurrent interpersonal situations." If we take Sullivan seriously, there has always been "multiphrenia"—for we have always been different when relating to various people. Only today, the people with whom we interact are even more diverse—hence we are even more multiphrenic! Through his original Johari Window, Joe Luft suggests that we remain sane in a multiphrenic world by engaging in authentic, richly textured relationships with other people. The feedback we receive provides us with a compass. The disclosure provides us with companionship on our difficult postmodern journey.

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[i] Prigogine, I. and Stengers, I. *Order Out of Chaos*. New York: Bantam Books, 1984
[ii] Durkheim, Emile. *The Division of Labor in Society*. New York:Press Press, 1933 (originally published in 1893).
[iii] Teilhard de Chardin, P. *The Phenomenon of Man*. New York: HarperCollins, 1955, p. 205.
[iv] Eisler, Riane. *The Chalice and the Blade*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1987.
[v] Arrow, Holly, McGrath, Joseph and Berdahl, Jennifer. *Small Groups as Complex Systems*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2000, pp. 149-155.
[vi] Bergquist, William. *Love Lingers Here: A Study of Long Term Relationships*. In preparation.
[vii]Sennett, Richard *The Fall of Public Man*. New York: Knopf, 1976.
[viii]Lasch, Christopher. *The Culture of Narcissism*. New York: Norton, 1979, p 103.
[ix]Luft, Joseph. *Of Human Interaction*. Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1969, p. 62.
[x] This incident was recounted in 1987 by Robert Loftus, at St. Andrews Presbyterian College, Laurenberg, North Carolina.
[xi] Harry Stack Sullivan. *The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry*. New York: Norton, 1953, pp. 110-111.