

THE SOUTHERN WALL

THE ART OF ENGAGEMENT AT SANTROPOL ROULANT

The Southern Wall © W. O. Nilsson 2003, 2006

Published by Santropol Roulant
4050 rue St. Urbain
Montreal, QC
H2W 1V3
www.santropolroulant.org

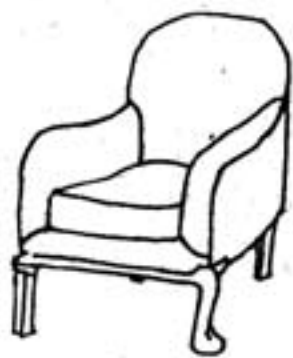
Design, layout, and illustration: Todd Stewart
Translation into French: Julie Lanctôt
Editing: Tana Paddock

Design, translation, and printing made possible with the support of the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	7
In Search of Engagement	11
Through an Open Door	15
From Contract to Commitment	21
From Roles to Gifts	33
From Routines to Rhythm	45

From Plans to Presence	53
From Boundaires to Shores	67
The Southern Wall	75
Dis-organizing	77
Coherence	81
How to Change the World	87
A Murmur on a Mountain	91



He fixed the chair. That's all you have to remember.

It is an early winter evening, and inside the Roulant's cluttered, cheerful office, work has almost finished. Most of the staff and volunteers have gone home, but a few still linger, tidying up paperwork or returning bags to the kitchen. There is a choir practicing in the middle of the room – a slight absurdity, of course. What is a little meals-on-wheels organization doing with a choir? But there they are: half a dozen singers standing near the couch, fumbling happily with the notes as they try to get the song right.

There is a knock at the door, and the music stops. Martin, the choir director, goes to have a look. He opens the door, and here is this man, ragged and damp from the thin evening snow. His eyes are unsteady, and he is muttering to himself, raving, "Je suis fucké, je vais me suicider" – I'm screwed, I'm going to kill myself. He repeats this and other things, his voice limp from the confusion of stories and half-words leaking out of him. He is too tired even to ask for anything. He just stands there waiting.

This place is not for someone like him. It is not equipped. There are no counselors here or social workers. No nurses or advocates. And it's late in the day. The office is closed.

Martin hesitates, then says, "Do you want to come and sit down?"

The man enters and sinks onto the couch. Martin asks him his name – we'll call him Claude. Someone else asks if he is hungry. He is, so a plate of food is brought over from the kitchen next door. Another person gets him a cup of coffee. Claude sits there and eats and

looks at the floor. There is nothing more to be done, so the choir resumes their rehearsal.

For a long time, Claude just stays on the couch listening to the singing. Now and then he mutters to himself, sometimes growing loud enough that Martin needs to quiet him. But mostly he listens. The choir is rehearsing the old bluegrass hymn "I'll Fly Away."

Some bright morning
When this life is over
I'll fly away . . .

After a while Claude begins to calm down. Those scratchy, hopeful notes hang in the air around him. And something in him turns. He seems to settle back into his own skin, even peeling off one of the two pairs of pants he is wearing. He puts them aside on the couch.

Then, during a pause in the music, he asks Martin if he can borrow some tools. He has noticed a broken chair sitting neglected in a corner. Martin gives him what he needs, and Claude turns the chair over, examining the useless leg.

Maybe he hesitates before he begins to work. Maybe he feels awkward and rust-covered as he tries to remember just how to give something away. But here is this chair, and it is broken. He begins to fix it.

What is it that lets a man suffocating with sadness start to breathe again? What is it that frees him from the dull, familiar weight of himself and moves him to look about for

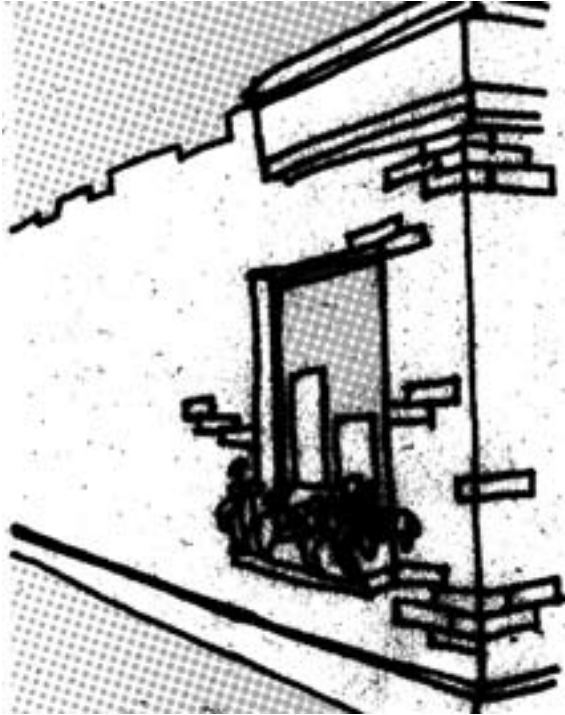
something to do?

Choir practice ends. Claude gets ready to leave with everyone else. Martin reminds him about his extra pants, but Claude waves him off. "I don't want them anymore," he says. He goes out into the night, and no one hears anything more about him.

Perhaps Claude is happier now. More likely he still struggles under much the same weight. This encounter was a little thing, after all. Surely it was too simple. A man is tired and hungry; you give him a place to rest and some bread. But what if that little space, that fragile opening to daylight, mattered? What if all of those little spaces matter?

Today, if you walk up the two brief steps leading to the back room of the office, you can still find that chair. You can even sit in it. The leg is fine.

•



IN SEARCH OF ENGAGEMENT

It can be difficult to talk about what matters most in organizations. We know that some organizations seem to sparkle with life and vitality while others feel ghostly, lost in their own shadows. Most organizations seem somewhere in between: if not dead, at least dull and mechanical. They rise severe and impassive before us, oblivious to much of what we care about, and it is hard to remember that we created these

organizations, and that we continue to re-create them each day.

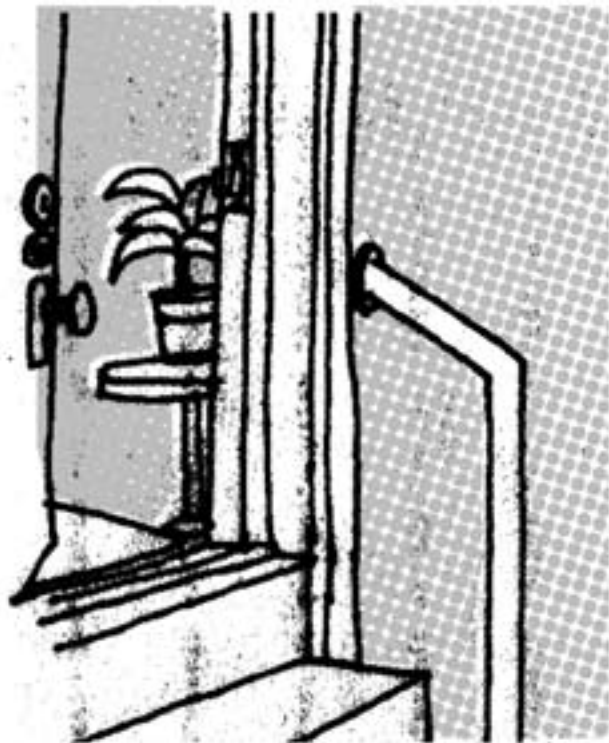
It is worth trying to talk about how we might, and occasionally do, create them differently. It is worth trying to think about the forces and patterns that infuse life into these stern, ritualized contraptions that seem to govern so much of our lives. I suspect that this is difficult work precisely because such forces and patterns, insofar as they are meaningful, cannot be found in the formal places we usually look. But let's suppose that we can say something about them, even if that something will always feel inadequate.

I'll start with one assumption: that these forces and patterns have much to do with *engagement*, with the nature and depth of the connections an organization has to its inner and outer worlds. When organizations fail, they are often portrayed as having been blind to various important things: cultural and political forces; customer, employee, or member needs; technological changes. These failed organizations can be seen as “disengaged” at one or many levels. Conversely, organizations that remain vital and responsive to their contexts can be thought of as deeply engaged. And here I'd like to put aside for the moment the kind of functional engagement that comes about when we start to work together on something technically difficult and exciting. This is a powerful force, no doubt, and we see it in many entrepreneurial settings from high-tech startups in Silicon Valley to nascent social movements in inner-city church basements. Instead, I want to explore a deeper kind of engagement, an engagement that, while not necessarily permanent, is more sustained and

more holistic than simple task excitement. This second kind of engagement has profound moral and social underpinnings. It is a state of being deeply connected not only to what we're doing, but why we're doing it, the way we're doing it, and with whom we're doing it.

Michael McMaster calls engagement “a natural human condition . . . the process of communication through which we are able to express ourselves in ways that allow for the full participation of others in creating possibility – a possible future, a new theory, a new opening for action.”¹ The word itself has many meanings. To a fiancée, an engagement is a *promise*. To a social maven, it is a *rendezvous*. To a railroad engineer, it is a *link*. And to a general, it is a *battle*. What these things have in common is that they imply a direct, sometimes profound, relation with someone or something else. The relation may not always be pleasant, but it is always intimate, always face-to-face.

**THESE FORCES
AND PATTERNS
HAVE MUCH
TO DO WITH
ENGAGEMENT,
WITH THE
NATURE AND
DEPTH OF THE
CONNECTIONS AN
ORGANIZATION
HAS TO ITS INNER
AND OUTER
WORLDS.**



THROUGH AN OPEN DOOR ...

So here is a small organization on a windy corner just a block off of one of Montreal's busiest streets, a street that shares its name with a river and a saint, a street that traces its way from one side of the island to the other, binding together an unlikely collection of people, shops, and *quartiers*. This small organization, this Santropol Roulant, doesn't take long to describe. It is a decade-old, meals-on-wheels program with

a core staff of a dozen. It relies primarily on an ever-changing group of more than 200 volunteers to prepare and deliver hot evening meals to some 100 clients five days a week. The volunteers and staff are mostly young – between 18 and 35 – though there are plenty of exceptions. The “wheels” in question are often on bikes, but they can also be found on busses, trains, cars, and shoes. The organization is located in the heart of Montreal’s Plateau district, but serves the entire city core.

Simple to describe, but difficult to explain; Santropol Roulant is a small organization with big themes. The program is straightforward enough, but the Roulant is widely recognized as an extraordinarily engaging organization. It was voted one of Canada’s ten best-run charities by the Globe and Mail in December 2000. It has also received the Peter F. Drucker Award for social innovation. Much of this recognition is due to the Roulant’s success in attracting volunteers from an age group that is notoriously difficult to pull in. That it is able to do this with no advertising and amidst the kind of turnover that is perfectly natural to students, wanderers, and early career explorers, is all the more striking. Almost all of the Roulant’s members perceive it as fundamentally a fun place to be, an organization that is committed to a kind of continual, creative play.

But what is at work here is deeper than simply having the ability to maintain a healthy volunteer base or to prepare and deliver meals in an enthusiastic way. Conversations at and about Santropol Roulant are often concerned with changing large-scale social patterns,

from creating a new understanding of food security and community support to investing a new generation of human beings with the ability to work in the world in a different, more meaningful way. Vanessa, a former executive director, describes this latter effort:

Santropol Roulant is . . . taking a leadership role in mobilizing a generation of young people to identify and address any social issue relevant in their community, creating the ability to address deep community issues and social challenges with confidence – and have a lot of fun while doing it . . . It is our responsibility to do our work with creativity, spirit and imagination – so that beyond achieving goals like new and transferable skills for young people or feeding isolated seniors, are the intangibles such as “being connected to something larger than myself.”²

Santropol Roulant appears to be able to work at once intimately and widely. It appears to be capable of creating a space where the things that matter most to the people involved and the things that matter most to the world at large can come together. This space is both cozy and vast. It is a living room and a planet. Something at work in the organization allows or nurtures a way of connecting, of relating, that is disarmingly

**SANTROPOL
ROULANT APPEARS
TO BE CAPABLE OF
CREATING A SPACE
WHERE THE THINGS
THAT MATTER MOST
TO THE PEOPLE
INVOLVED AND
THE THINGS THAT
MATTER MOST TO
THE WORLD AT
LARGE CAN COME
TOGETHER.**

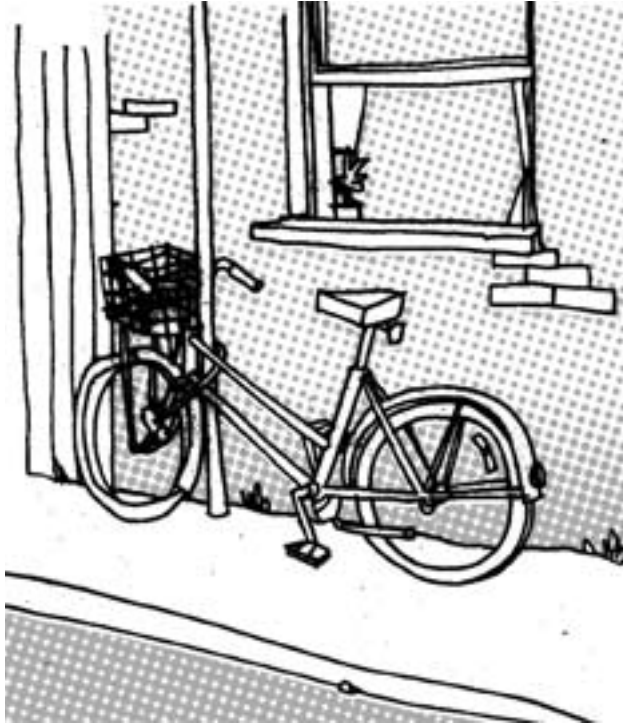
humble and admirably ambitious, and ultimately, I think, true.

I don't mean to sound utopian. Santropol Roulant is far from perfect. It has its triumphs and its trials. It has its good days and its bad. But a short stroll around the office, an hour in the kitchen, a delivery run or two, all make clear that something is different here. People talk to each other in a warm and unusual way. They work with each other quickly and efficiently but with little fuss. They seem energetic. They seem connected. And even when there is sadness, confusion, or stress, the level of engagement, of human-ness, remains high. The place simply feels *alive*. I couldn't find anyone involved with the Roulant who didn't agree at least with that: that the place is brimming with life. And I wanted to know why.

What follows is an attempt to understand just what it is that creates space for the kind of collective engagement experienced at the Roulant. Call it a reflection or a meditation, it is meant to develop in a grounded way themes and language that resonate with us, that reveal to us things

we might already know but have forgotten how to say. This paper is the result of several months of conversation and observation. Many people have contributed their ideas and experiences. Some of those people are visible in the following pages; most are not. But there are traces here of everyone who welcomed me when I first entered the Roulant. They, and many others, continue to welcome me, and they will welcome you too should you one day find yourself wandering past a certain red door on a green wall on Duluth street and feel moved to turn the knob.

FIVE THEMES



FROM CONTRACT TO COMMITMENT

We are welcomed gently. There are 10 or 12 of us this evening, prospective volunteers ready to be oriented. We are in the large main room of the Roulant's office, sitting or draping or perching ourselves wherever we can in something like a circle.

It's an open but nookish room. By the door a sunsplashed collection of couches and stuffed chairs. In various corners and crannies workspaces for staff. In the middle of the room a long table, at times a

gathering place, at times a public project area covered with markers and pens and paper. The hieroglyphics in this shared room are not hard to read: openness, rhythm, imagination. Every bit of space is fair game for invention, for all the things a free mind can do with information, color, shape, paper, silicon, ink, scissors, and glue. And nothing is closeted. Coats, hats, bags are hung or piled cheerfully in an interior corner. The room seems to have a dozen corners if such a thing is possible.

We are relaxed but attentive, waiting for Allison to begin. She says hello in English and French and then invites us to talk about ourselves a bit in whatever way and in whatever language we feel comfortable.

So we begin to tell each other stories. Stories about who we are, where we're from, what we think we want. We are here for many reasons: we're new in town, we want to learn French or English, we have some free time and want to give to the community in some way, we want to get some experience in the social sector. We are here for one reason: we want to connect - whether vaguely or specifically, whether to something inside or outside of ourselves. We are, with various voices and in various ways, asking for an opportunity to move beyond our current boundaries, to commit however hesitatingly, a small act of sacred trespass.

As each person speaks in turn, offering a new tone or timbre, the previous voices linger in the air, diffusing through each other, and the air grows pleasantly thicker with their trails.

Each new voice is supported more fully as it rests on the tentative current of the voices that have come before.

When we are finished, Allison tells a story too, the story of Santropol Roulant. She doesn't begin with the mission or the structure or the process. She begins with the two people that started it all, Keith and Chris. She tells us about their experiences, as they have been handed down to her, and then begins to layer the story with other experiences, with the other histories that have built the Roulant. She speaks about having fun. She speaks about what it is like to be the only person that someone who is homebound might see that day or that week. She speaks about food and bicycles and working together in an office or a kitchen, and roaming the streets of Montreal with meals on your back and finding just the right door with just the right person behind it. She speaks about the long conversations and the short conversations and the silent conversations that happen at those doors. She speaks about saying the right things, or even saying the wrong things that turn out to be right enough.

What is asked of us? Nothing really. We don't have to commit to a certain number of months of work or a specific number of shifts per week. We don't have to distribute our time across various functions, nor do we have to specialize. We are not assigned to particular shifts. We are just asked to walk over to the sign-up board whenever we can and to put our names down where we want to put them down. We can do this hours or weeks in advance. We are not lectured about not showing up for shifts we have signed up for. We are simply

asked to take our signature seriously and to call if we can't make it for some reason. We fill out one sheet of paper for a file somewhere. We are asked to put down a couple of references in case there is a problem. But we are told that there has never been a problem.

Nothing is asked of us. But everything is asked of us too. We are asked to bring what we know and what we can do and who we are and who we want to be to this work, to engage ourselves in some precisely limited and yet completely unlimited way. We are asked to share our questions and ideas and talents at every opportunity.

Then we are shown about. We are introduced to whoever happens to be around. We are given a cookie. And we go home.

•

What does it mean to have a relationship with an organization?

An organization itself can be thought of as a pattern of relationships, a set of structures or energies that persist over time and that define the way that various people relate to each other and to the resources in the organization's domain. But what does it mean then to have a relationship with this "pattern of relationships"? When we work in organizations we all feel it to one extent or another - that apart from our relationship to our bosses or co-workers we have a connection, for good or ill, to the organization itself. So we become involved in

a strange, recursive dynamic. We relate personally to the way we relate collectively. This dynamic is shaped by how we are treated, but more importantly it is defined by how we are *seen*. It seems that within any organization a particular way of understanding what a human being *is* and what he or she is *for* quickly becomes encoded, whether formally through policies or informally through culture.

What kind of relationship does Santropol Roulant have with the people in its compass? The details, the little moments, begin to cohere: the welcoming at orientation; the way that heads lift up from work and eyes smile as you walk into the office or the kitchen; the time that is always taken, with clients, with volunteers, with staff, to make room for what is small, personal, even eccentric; the sense that no matter how important or demanding the business of the organization is, there is room, there is time, for you. Here is a great openness – serene, unguarded - an unusual kind of daring.

In most organizations, the fundamental nature of the relationship between the organization and its members can be thought of as contractual. These contracts may be explicit or implicit, but they have in common their narrowness, their specificity, and their focus on *protecting each side from the other*. A contract is a limited kind of promise to do certain things. It is meant to close off possibilities, to ensure that what is supposed to happen does happen. And it does not concern itself with things beyond its purview. Thus we generally find ourselves in organizations with a clear sense of the narrow roles we are

to fulfill and what we can expect to get by fulfilling them. The terms are plain, and the organizations and we are both careful not to be cheated.

There is a form of deep commitment that is almost precisely the opposite of a contract. It is the kind of commitment we experience in our most meaningful relationships, and Santropol Roulant's primary energy seems to be devoted to developing this kind of commitment, rather than focusing on extending its network of formal or tacit contracts.

A contract differs from a deep commitment in three important ways. First, a contract is concerned with safety and protection, so it sets its relationship parameters in very specific terms. Contractual language is exact. It is meant to say what it is meant to say and nothing more. Thus a contractual relationship is precisely *defined* so that it can be understood and controlled from the start. If the contract is well crafted, both parties know exactly what is going to happen throughout the contractual relationship. In a sense, all meaningful conversation takes place before we actually enter into the contract. When we create a relationship of deep commitment, on the other hand, we understand that the conversation is just beginning. This kind of commitment is not about definition; it is about *exploration*. We are committed precisely in the sense that we *don't* know what is going to happen. We don't know how the relationship will evolve or what it will become. In spite of this lack of clarity, we are prepared to enter into the relationship with good will and openness.

Contracts are about controlling and reducing uncertainty. Commitments are about accepting uncertainty and moving forward into a relationship despite this uncertainty. Contracts require skepticism. Commitments require trust. A contract begins with an *execution*. A commitment begins with an *invitation*. And this invitation is much like the gentle, imprecise, yet wholehearted welcome that the Roulant offers its new volunteers. Very little is defined at a Santropol Roulant orientation. But much is opened up, and much is offered. And the invitation continues to be extended in a generous way throughout one's relationship with the organization, whether that relationship is five days or five years. People come and go and come back again as their lives and interests change. It would make no sense when starting a friendship to demand to know how long the friendship was going to last, what precise form it was going to take, or who would be doing what for whom. We make the commitment, the leap, and then develop the friendship on its own terms. Organizational relationships at the Roulant develop in much the same way. They are not without *any* sense of specificity – when a volunteer begins, she knows that she will cook and deliver meals, after all – but that specificity gives way to discovery as the relationship deepens. The volunteer decides that maybe she'd be happier fixing bikes than spending time in the kitchen. A client decides that every day she will walk to the Roulant offices and have her lunch there. A committed relationship has room for the unexpected – for quirks and extravagances and unlooked-for blooming in out-of-the-way corners.

The second way that a contract differs from a commitment is in terms of depth. Here I refer to the depth of self that is being invested in the relationship. If I have a contract with you, I ask for and expect only the narrowest range of your humanity. I am interested only in the immediately functional aspects of your personality, only those abilities of yours that serve the interests I have outlined in the contract. I don't care what you do or who you are outside of this. If anything outside of the contract is going to affect the relationship, I try to figure out a way to put it in the contract (thus drug testing or a prohibition against speech that reflects badly on the organization). A commitment, on the other hand, doesn't presume to know exactly what is useful or instrumental in a person. A commitment does not make the assumption that a person can be chopped up into parts, with each part corresponding to a skill or ability. When a relationship is based on commitment, it doesn't occur to us that we can easily separate out a person's love of jazz from his fear of snakes from his ability to make an omelet. We don't think of a friend as a neatly ordered set of loves and fears and skills. We think of him as an interesting, strange, flawed, but *whole*, human being. The great teacher and educational scholar John Taylor Gatto notes that networks, perhaps the primary social structure in modern society, are built upon what I am calling here contractual relationships. He contrasts networks with communities, which are created from something like commitment.

Networks, however, don't require the whole person, but only a narrow piece. If you function in a network it asks you to repress all the parts of yourself except the network-interest part – a highly unnatural act although one you can get used to. In exchange, the network will deliver efficiency in the pursuit of some limited aim. This is in fact a devil's bargain, since on the promise of some future gain one must surrender the wholeness of one's present humanity. . . . A community is a place in which people face each other over time in all their human variety, good parts, bad parts, and all the rest. Such places promote the highest quality of life possible, lives of engagement and participation.³

Gatto's devil's bargain is not one that people seem to be asked to make at the Roulant. Interestingly, however, it's not that conversations there tend to be deeply personal in their details. Personal details slip in now and then, but no more, and perhaps less, than in many organizations I have seen. But the *feeling* is quite personal, as if you have been invited to bring the fullness of yourself to the work that you are doing - not to speak about it, necessarily, but to live it, to express it. You work on things that matter to you and in a way that matters to you. This seems to be even truer of the people that have been there the longest. Over time, the permission to be oneself that has been granted seems to

**CONTRACTS
ARE ABOUT
CONTROLLING
AND REDUCING
UNCERTAINTY.
COMMITMENTS ARE
ABOUT ACCEPTING
UNCERTAINTY
AND MOVING
FORWARD INTO
A RELATIONSHIP
DESPITE THIS
UNCERTAINTY.**

encourage people to discover just who that self is and what it consists of.

The third important way that a contract differs from a commitment is that it encourages us to think mainly about what we can *get*. When we are negotiating a contract, we are most concerned with our side of things. How can we ensure that we will receive what we believe we are entitled to receive? And how can we ensure that we will not have to contribute more than we believe we should be required to? We let the other party worry about defining its own interests. True commitment requires a different focus. When we make a commitment to a relationship, we focus on what we can *give*. We search for ways in which we can help others grow, develop, succeed, be happy. Much of the language and much of the practice at Santropol Roulant has this latter focus. It is no accident that the main office resembles nothing so much as a schoolroom. It is open, teeming with paper and markers and tape, the walls covered with all sorts of notes, pictures, photographs,

calendars, and schedules. The organization sees itself very much as a nexus for the growth and development of everyone involved: clients, volunteers, staff, board, the community at large. This focus is mirrored by organization members themselves, most of whom seem unusually focused on making Santropol Roulant a richer place for everyone involved, richer in terms of vitality, skill, sustainability, and ultimately, identity.

The focus on giving is more than just another aspect of commitment. It is what allows that commitment to change and deepen over time. Giving is the engine of personal and organizational movement at Santropol Roulant. Without it, the other two aspects of commitment, openness toward the future and dedication to the whole person, might result in something static, even shapeless – a being together that has no motion, no doing. There may be nothing wrong with such a state, but it has little to do with what we term organization, which is essentially a functional beast. Of course a contract is, in addition to an article of protection, one way of creating movement. In fact it is the one that we usually rely upon. But an ecology of giving, like the one nurtured at the Roulant, is another and perhaps more powerful way of creating movement. In the next section, I examine this gift ecology in more detail, exploring the way that the focus on gifts changes the very nature of the role structure that we generally assume is the foundation of organizational architecture.



FROM ROLES TO GIFTS

The staff meeting goes something like this. Midday, a handful of people gather around a table in the middle of the main office. An issue is presented. Who presented it? I'm not sure. It is passed comfortably about. It has no captain or champion. Voices are quick but relaxed and punctuated with laughter. Frequently two or three people speak at once, but there is no sense of contest. Input comes from any angle. The speed increases, and soon there is a kind of music to the discussion, a self-organized,

contrapuntal ease that allows movement from one issue to the next with unstudied assurance. Sometimes decisions are made. Sometimes they are not, and a brief shared reflection suffices. No positions are staked out. No authority flashed. Perhaps Brian knows more about one issue than most. Perhaps Marc knows more about another. But there are no claims of ownership. And here, uncloistered, in the center of the main room, the meeting cheerfully pauses as necessary to greet whoever wanders in with a question or a hello.

Later, a bearded, middle-aged man and his wife come bustling through the door. The man speaks excited English with a South Asian accent. His name is Ishfaq. His wife is Rasheeda. They are from Pakistan, and they volunteer regularly, often spending the first part of the morning kitchen shift cutting fruit for fruit salad. They have developed their own volunteering rhythm, not aligned precisely with the formal work shifts, but they are as active as anyone involved with the Roulant. They had been in Montreal for two years when they began volunteering here, and they say that the people at the Roulant are the first Canadians they ever really talked to.⁴

Ishfaq pulls his Rasheeda toward the bulletin board. "I'll show you my picture," he says, his voice booming through the office. He stares at the board for a bit, searching it hungrily, then grows concerned.

"Brian! My picture is not here. I wanted to show it to my wife."

Brian, laughing, joins them. "Someone stole it. You were too good looking!"

“Really?” Ishfaq looks worried.

Brian reaches down and picks a picture up from the ground. “No, no, no. It’s right here. It fell on the floor. I’m kidding. I was kidding.”

Ishfaq laughs. “Look at me,” he says as Brian places the picture back on the board. Rasheeda laughs too. Ishfaq turns to Brian. “You chicklet! You are a chicklet!”

As Ishfaq and Rasheeda leave, still laughing, Ishfaq waves his arm in the air, embracing the room and everyone in it with his voice, his happiness: “Goodbye, chicklets!”

•

It’s difficult at first to figure out who’s who at Santropol Roulant. They don’t tend to tell you. If you probe enough, you’re likely to discover that there are such things as kitchen managers and volunteer coordinators, but it takes some detective work to connect these creatures with Pascal and Allison whom you met rather randomly some time ago. Working in the kitchen for the first time, say, it’s easy to feel confused. People are cheerfully minding what they’re about and perfectly happy letting you mind what you’re about, even if you have no idea what that might be.

Organization theorist Herbert Simon says that an organization is a particular kind of role system. And organizational roles, unlike many others, “tend to be highly elaborated,

relatively stable, and defined to a considerable extent in explicit and even written terms.” It is this stability, this “predictability,” that is largely responsible for enabling “organizations to deal in a coordinated way with their environments.”⁵

Perhaps. But at the Roulant, things seem to work somewhat differently. Roles do exist, but they are decidedly unelaborated and shifting creatures. In fact, here it is less useful to think of Pascal as “the kitchen manager” than it is to think of him as “the person who happens to manage the kitchen . . . at the moment . . . among other things . . .” There are many clearly defined and predictable *functions* at the Roulant, and many of these functions must be performed with an exacting consistency. Otherwise people don’t eat. But somehow, people here are not confused with the functions that they happen to be fulfilling at any particular time. Pascal is Pascal before he is anything else.

At the Roulant, there are two sorts of role flexibility. The first is based on organizational needs. If there aren’t enough volunteers on a given day (fairly rare), members of the staff will heave to, spending a few hours in the kitchen, or jumping on a bike and pedaling off on a delivery route. This type of flexibility is common enough in many small or entrepreneurial organizations.

But the second type of role flexibility is much less common. It is based not on what is needed but on what is offered. At any moment, the Roulant is a welter of possibilities and

ideas, all of which have been born from the particular talents and inspirations of particular human beings. Thus roles shift, teams form, projects begin. Many of these things were not sought in advance. Many of them were not even conceived of. They arise out of skill and desire more than out of the organization's current demands. It's as if the organization asked of each person walking in the door not "What need can you fill?" but "What gifts do you bring?" This question is asked of staff, volunteers, and clients, and it is asked continuously. It is an unusual question. It is answered in unlikely ways . . .

Staff member Minnie has the idea of connecting people involved in the Roulant more deeply by starting an oral history project. After a period of conversation with various people throughout the organization, she has a team helping to bring this project to life. She calls the project the Map of the World. Soon clients, volunteers and staff are recounting the stories of their lives – over the phone, into tape recorders, into video cameras. And almost as soon, those stories are adorning the walls and the website of the organization, as well as inhabiting the minds of all those who are doing the interviews. People seem delighted to speak and to be listened to and to connect to the Roulant in a more meaningful way. Navin, a client, can hardly wait until his interview day arrives. He talks about it frequently with staff and with the volunteers

delivering his dinner. When the day arrives, he dresses up, is delivered to the Roulant office, and sits down to tell two volunteers the story of his life. It is quite a life. Roughly 50, Navin has been blind from birth. But he has lived all over the world: India, Indonesia, the U. S., Mexico, England, Canada. He talks about the different cultures he has experienced. He talks about his childhood and his parents and traveling and playing the guitar and learning languages and making one's way through the world when you're blind. Other stories of other clients are equally rich and the organization seems to swell with all of the life contained in them. Later, "Harvesting Histories" becomes an ongoing part of the Roulant with many kinds of projects springing forth from it.

Ashley, a young volunteer just beginning her science studies at university, decides she doesn't want to be a technician. She asks the Roulant for help in figuring out how to apply her scientific mind to the nonprofit sector. She doesn't have a specific idea, but she likes to ruminate upon organizations and systems and larger social patterns. So she is set to work thinking about youth leadership and about how to develop more connections between young people and their communities. Soon, the Summer Cycle program is born, combining

summer volunteer opportunities for high school students with chances to visit different kinds of voluntary sector organizations. The students hold dialogues in which they can reflect together on what they have seen and done, on what the voluntary sector is and could be, and on where they could make a difference.

A few people are interested in gardening. Their interest evolves into a larger conversation about sustainability and about supplying the Santropol Roulant kitchen with organic vegetables. The conversation grows to include organic farmers and other interested people. A small plot of land in the city is made available and an herb garden is started, with plans to develop more gardens in the future and to continue to explore issues of food security, sustainability, and health in a broader way.

None of these projects (or the many dozens like them) was created or driven by an existing role. All of them were created through subtle inspirations, half-formed urges, barely-articulate longings. And none of them required extensive staff reorganization or a long-term commitment of time and money. Each was built into something vital by drawing

on many people who could contribute in many ways. Organizations understandably tend to guard their time and energy fiercely. Most require coherent plans with goals and timelines and clearly outlined benefits before a project can be launched. Certainly most organizations require at least a moderate understanding of the problem and a reasonable set of skills on the part of the person who is leading the new project. But these requirements prevent people, particularly young and inexperienced people, from launching their energies and inspirations upon issues that they will not come to comprehend until they are up to their thighs in the muddy complexity of real projects. And these requirements also limit the scope of what might be achieved to the initial, often poverty-stricken imaginings that we have when we embark upon any new venture.

How does Santropol Roulant keep itself from dissipating its energy in too many vague projects launched in too many uncertain directions? Patience. Each person with an idea is asked to develop a relationship with the organization *first*, to spend some time working with people, making meals, delivering meals, talking to clients. As the relationship evolves, the idea too can begin to be nurtured. By the time a project requires a significant commitment of energy on the part of the organization, it has already lived something of a life. It has grown, come to be understood, and taken root in the organization in a coherent and aligned manner.

Lest this gift ecology of the Roulant's be seen as nothing more than a playground or a practice field, it is important to recognize the great and naked ambition it embodies. I know

of few small organizations that think so big. This ambition is on two fronts: the personal and the social. The organization assumes that people's lives can be genuinely transformed by brief, irregular encounters with it – by a summer of volunteering, or by seven months on staff, or by five-minutes in a conversation delivered with a meal. But this inward turn is companion to an equally transformative vision of social change. This tiny organization sees itself as operating in a worldwide arena as it attempts to develop and articulate new approaches to community building, food security, and youth engagement. And it has a bone-deep understanding that provoking personal and social change of this order requires that gifts be unshackled from roles.

I hope the paradox here is apparent. It is generally understood that role building and role refinement are what have allowed modern institutions to evolve and modern society to advance. The sociologists Berger and Luckman argue that it is the repetitive patterning inherent in role systems, the disengagement from what is personal and accidental, that

IT'S AS IF THE ORGANIZATION ASKED OF EACH PERSON WALKING IN THE DOOR NOT "WHAT NEED CAN YOU FILL?" BUT "WHAT GIFTS DO YOU BRING?"

creates the kind of *reliable, predictable specialization* necessary for the development of complex societies.⁶ When I can rely on the baker and the butcher, the astrophysicist and the accounts-receivable clerk, I am free to focus my own energies where they are most useful and most amenable to the growth of expertise. So far so good. Here a role system seems to be something that allows individual expression to a greater degree than a system in which each person must perform all of the functions of daily living.

But it is clear that something negative is at work here as well. Roles may start out as the expression of human individuality and difference, but they quickly become detached from that individuality. They take on a life of their own, and they leave us with proportionately less life. As we become more deeply invested in roles, we become more painfully separated from our own complexity and our own rhythms of change.

Surely, though, we do not wish to give up roles? We cherish the ability to specialize in our work lives according to our own talents and interests. But this kind of specialization does happen at Santropol Roulant. The experience there suggests not that a role is the opposite of a gift but that a role is a pale imitation of a gift. It suggests that there are ways to rescue humans from rigid roles and to allow them to act even more specifically, even more “specially” (that is, with even more “specialization”). Something like a role system still exists at Santropol Roulant of course, but the roles are more like clothes than like armor or skin. They are loose fitting, colorful, permeable, transitory. They are

recognizable, but changeable. They accentuate what is unique in each person rather than hiding it.

If a role structure allows us to build skyscrapers and space shuttles, perhaps a gift ecology allows us to build healthy humans and sustainable communities. Gifts after all, unlike many other kinds of transactions, breed life. They are fundamentally organic. And they connect being and doing, soul and skill, in powerful ways. At Santropol Roulant, a person is seen as *offering* gifts, and these gifts must be respected and used. A person is seen as *having* gifts, and these gifts must be nurtured and cultivated. And a person is seen as *being*, him or herself, a gift. And this gift must be honored and cherished. Perhaps it is this last perspective that is most important. Perhaps it is this way of looking at things that leads a man to hurry his wife into a room, to search hungrily, devotedly, for his own face, and, finding it, to point proudly at this picture, this spot, this moment on a wall.



FROM ROUTINES TO RHYTHM

I arrive for my first kitchen shift a few minutes late. Three people are at work over various pots and bowls. Despite the music coming from the food-spattered CD player, the atmosphere is monkish. The three people work with little conversation. They move about easily, comfortably, each attending to his or her own task, alone but in harmony. I stand there for a bit, wondering what to do. Occasionally someone glances up and smiles at me, but no one asks me who I am or offers advice. They seem

untroubled by my awkward presence, content to wait until I come a little farther in, cross the threshold a little more clearly.

Eventually, I introduce myself and ask what I can do. “Do you mind stirring the meat for a bit?” No, I don’t mind, though it turns out that stirring several pounds of semi-frozen ground beef is harder than it looks. But I stir. And I listen to snatches of conversation, jumping in myself now and then. And I watch people chop things and mix things, and I lose myself in the enjoyment of the task as a couple of hours drift by. After a while, I can see the dishes coming together. I start to grasp the rhythm of the thing and am able to pitch in with fewer and fewer questions as the shift flows on.

The kitchen is the heart of Santropol Roulant’s physical activity, but it is much smaller than the office, measuring perhaps 15 by 20 feet. It is not an unusual kitchen. Two industrial stoves, a double pot sink, racks and drawers, the occasional flash of counter space, all surrounding a large butcher block table where much of the work is done. In this small area, 90-100 meals per day are prepared with surprisingly little fuss. I have worked in the kitchen several times and never once seen anything approaching bustle, let alone hurry. Some days there is more conversation, some days there is less. Some days there is music. Some days there is none.

There is little sense of fierce scheduling or rigid process. Of course there are recipes to be followed. And there is one firm deadline – meals packed and ready by 3:00 p.m. But the

relationships and specific tasks are improvised. And the work itself is fluid, proceeding with subtle coordination and punctuated by little pauses, little rests, and the occasional coda to take care of a last detail or two. Over time, from one shift to the next, I find myself moving, however haltingly, away from the need to know the order of things. There is an order, I'm sure, and the kitchen manager knows it well. But I let go of any desire to inhabit a sequence, to know what happens next. And I learn to content myself with other things: with knives and apple muffins and strings beans.

•

There is a great regularity demanded at Santropol Roulant. Ninety to one hundred meals per day must be cooked and delivered five days a week in all weathers. People depend upon these meals, and the organization takes its commitment very seriously. It is tempting to suppose that the kind of flexibility exhibited by the Roulant in so many ways might be at odds with this demand for regularity. It is easy to imagine that there must be some kind of conflict between the Roulant's open culture and its rigid production schedule, that one must suffer at the expense of the other. This does not appear to be so. That the organization has been able to achieve virtually flawless consistency in meal delivery despite the rapid volunteer turnover and the daunting Montreal winters, suggests instead that the Roulant's culture contributes to its performance rather than detracts from it.

**THE RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN
ORGANIZATIONAL
DEMANDS AND THE
HUMAN BEINGS
WHO ENACT
THOSE DEMANDS
IS NOT SO MUCH
A MATTER OF
ROUTINE AS IT IS
OF RHYTHM.**

The Roulant has its formal processes, of course. There are staff-driven routines that shape the meals-on-wheels program. Menus are planned well in advance. Client food preferences are carefully tracked in the daily cooking and delivery schedules. Staff keep a close eye on the volunteer sign-up sheet to make sure that there are sufficient numbers and types (drivers, new/experienced, etc.) of volunteers available each day. But the fluidity with which the numerous and ever-changing volunteers do the actual work has a different flavor to it than these more carefully controlled benchmarks. Volunteers sign up as often or as little as they want to. The number of people in the kitchen varies and the way that kitchen roles shift about varies as well. There is no rigid production schedule in the kitchen, though the kitchen coordinator manages to guide volunteers gently in such a way that the meals are always ready by 3:00 p.m. Deliveries also seem to happen naturally and easily with very little interference from the staff (although they pitch in as necessary).

It's not that there is no planning, or sense of process, or order at Santropol Roulant. There are all of these things, but they are unobtrusive, relaxed, even yielding as specific people and circumstances interact to alter them. The relationship between organizational demands and the human beings who enact those demands is not so much a matter of routine as it is of rhythm. Work processes at the Roulant are less about encoding than they are about cadence – there is a kind of beat that gives structure and order and pace to the various regular tasks at hand without overly constraining those who would take pleasure in the doing of such tasks. The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins coined the term “sprung rhythm” to describe a meter that he used frequently in which the accent of each foot was always on the first beat, but which allowed the feet to have any number of total beats. Phrases with this rhythm seem at first to be much closer to chaotic everyday speech than to the firm architectures of traditional meters, but as one listens more deeply, the underlying pulse of the verse becomes apparent. The *doing* at Santropol Roulant seems to partake of this tempo; small, casual, everyday interactions are held together by a subtle, but purposeful “sprung” rhythm.

Poet David Whyte notes that this kind of irregular regularity is characteristic of healthy systems:

Watching the marching, dull and unwavering trace of a human heart on the CRT screen, a doctor finds one of the sure signs of a heart about to die. It lacks robustness. Disturb it and it will careen into complete stasis or complete chaos. A healthy heartbeat full of strange little flourishes and incongruous leaps but true to an overall pattern over time given the same nudge always settles easily, disturbance over, back into a life-giving beat . . . Learning of this, we surely must cry out in joy and confirmation for all the little insanities and eccentricities that inform our personal organizational systems and keep them robust and healthy.⁷

Another way to think about rhythm and process at Santropol Roulant is to understand that activity tends to be shaped or drawn together around specific repeating transition times such as the shift from cooking to delivery or the move from morning to lunchtime for the staff. Lunch may seem like an obvious and universal marker, hardly worth mentioning here. But in a small office where everyone might be expected to fend for him or herself at whatever time was convenient, the staff have developed an informal practice of having lunch together whenever possible. This practice (or rhythm) is taken seriously enough that at one staff meeting people discussed how to preserve space for communal lunch from other ever-encroaching demands. When transitions take on a sacred quality, even if that quality

is informal and unritualized, they can become reliable and rhythmic markers, maintaining structure in a gentle and human way.

In general, loosely organizing work around a few major transition times or spaces can be thought of as “seasonal” rather than processual. And a seasonal rhythm, like a heartbeat, also bespeaks a type of irregular regularity. The exact timing and nature of the transition from one season to the next is flexible, as each transition derives from all sorts of unpredictable, natural vagaries. But while the strength and length of each season may vary from year to year, the movement from one season to the next is reliable. It can be counted on if anything can. Seasons are not only reliable, but effective. They provide alignment, balance, and certain movement. Seasonal rhythms might appear inefficient to us because they are slower and less exact than the process- and routine-based organizational rhythms we are used to. But seasonal rhythms are able to reconcile an enormous amount of information. They are attuned to the infinite subtle energy shifts typical of any complex environment. Ultimately, they express information more than they constrain action.

And so, as each season rights the last and clears space for the next, as rhythm yields to rhythm, it’s not only that things happen, it’s that the right things happen.



FROM PLANS TO PRESENCE

When Madame G- comes to the door, she is wearing a purple shirt. It has purple swirls that form a purple pattern, and as I hand her her food I say, “Votre chemise est belle.” Your shirt is beautiful.

This startles Madame G -. She purses her mouth and turns her head away from me. Her eyes dart about as if she is looking for an escape.

“Quoi?” she says.

“Votre chemise. C’est belle. Je l’aime.”

She clutches nervously at her collar, looking even more disturbed. “Ma chemise?” she says. She begins to inspect it, searching it for signs of trouble.

“Non, c’est belle,” I say. “J’aime la couleur.”

She nods and appears to consider what I have said. It clearly worries her, but she seems willing to think about it for a while. She remains deeply pensive as she turns and shuts the door.

At the next house it is my turn to be confused.

Monsieur B- is happy to see me. He is thin and animated and younger than many of the clients, maybe 50. He is dressed in a tee shirt and pajama bottoms.

“Bonjour, Monsieur B-,” I say.

“Bonjour, mon ami,” says Monsieur B-. He asks me about the weather, and I respond as best I can.

“Vous êtes Français? De Paris?” You are French, he asks. From Paris? Some half-remembered tone from one of my Parisian French teachers in grade school must still linger in my mediocre, American-bred French.

“Non, non,” I say. “Je suis Américain.”

He laughs and launches into a long narrative. I can't keep up with it. It seems to have something to do with the current state of the world and with videos and terrorists. I nod and say, "Oui, c'est vrai," when it seems appropriate. After several minutes he shrugs and spreads his arm and says "En tout cas . . . "

This I understand: in any case; anyway.

"En tout cas . . . " I say, and Monsieur B- laughs and claps me on the shoulder. We appear to have had a good conversation.

I walk away thinking about little moments like these, moments that mock the tangle of ill-understood words that surround them. These moments contradict our confusion by being, somehow, true. They are true and remain true despite our inability to say why they are true or what is true about them. I have come to share the Roulant's perfect faith that these moments matter, that something important happens during them, though I don't know what it is.

Words are funny things at the Roulant. Once I ask Allison to explain something to me. I ask her what she thinks is at the heart of the Roulant's considerable vitality. She says that maybe it's better not to talk about it. As much time as they spend, lately, trying to share what it is that they're about, trying to figure out a way to give it voice, she wonders whether too much talking about things might not be dangerous. She wonders whether whatever is essential in the Roulant's experiences might not be altered, or even damaged, by trying too hard to capture it in words.

There are many ways for an organization to relate to time. Some organizations are anchored in the past, committed to maintaining the structures and cultures from which they arose. Determined to re-enact their own founding mythologies, these organizations are focused on returning. Other organizations live in the future, driven by goals and objectives and seemingly interested only in arriving. Santropol Roulant appears to be passionately grounded in the present. Its energies are primarily rooted in becoming.

We generally speak of a person in a state of focused, creative awareness as being *present*. There is a long tradition, particularly in the East, of associating this kind of psychological or spiritual presence with a heightened ability to live happily, peacefully, and purposefully. Mystics from all religious traditions speak of this state, as do modern psychologists interested in creativity (see, e.g., Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's *Flow*⁸). The concept of presence in these contexts suggests a diminishment or erasure of the boundaries between the subject, object, and action. It suggests a level of deep engagement.

One feels something like this presence at Santropol Roulant. In the way that papers and pens are put down to greet whoever walks in the door. In the flexibility of the organization's rhythms as it responds supplely to the opportunities or challenges of the moment. In the openness to each new talent or energy that emerges, regardless of whether that talent or energy fits neatly into any existing goal or structure. And most of all, in the honoring of all the small moments, the encounters that are too strange, and specific, and quirky ever to be

made part of any plan. These encounters can't be tamed. They can't be forecast. They can only be lived as they present themselves one by one, each following each.

It's not that Santropol Roulant never thinks about its past or its future. It invokes both, but in particular ways. Let's start with the past. The story of the Roulant's beginning is notably alive. People frequently refer to Keith and Chris, the organization's founders, and the way that, from the kitchen of a neighboring restaurant, they imagined and created a place for generations to interact in a compelling way. At volunteer orientation, the telling of this story is turned into an artful myth. But like all true myths – that is, all myths that hold on to their original truth – the story is not codified. It is not distributed in written form. It is not embedded in procedures or structures. It is simply told. It is spoken, and frequently, by many people, at many times, in many ways.

When a story is spoken it enters the present in a way that a written story cannot. The story is heard in a living, human voice; it has vibration, color, and tone. And the story changes with each telling. Each voice sounds different, giving the story a different physical resonance. And each narrator shapes the story in terms of language and plot in a slightly different way. The story is embodied; it lives in and springs from a body. It is literally alive.

This aliveness is true of any oral tradition. It is true of any culture that arranges itself around spoken stories. And Santropol Roulant is, in many ways, composed of stories. People

tell stories there all day long – not just the founding story, but stories of encounters, and of experiences and sensations. Technical conversations bloom into stories. A meeting meant to decide how to handle the burgeoning number of special meal requests only comes to life when staff members begin telling stories of the more eccentric requests that they have received. Each story is about a particular encounter with a particular client. Volunteers also share stories as they run routes with each other. Mrs. M. doesn't like you to knock on her door. Monsieur L. might want to talk about his children for a while. And the clients themselves are often bursting with stories. They bring *their* pasts to life and infuse the organization with a living, daily history that is larger than the slight, 10-year history it has accumulated on its own.

There is a *bardic* culture here, a culture in which everyone is a bard, wandering from place to place exchanging stories - practically singing them, such is the energy and enthusiasm behind the words. And a spoken, story-based culture like this demands a kind of presence that a formal, textual culture does not. As each story is voiced, it ceases to be of the past and emerges into the present. The telling of the story face-to-face floods it with present energy. The past is re-created, not represented, and is thus made new and altogether of the moment.

Something quite similar governs the Roulant's relationship with the future. Most organizations interact with the future via plans. A vision of the future may govern the

plans. But it is the plans - detailed, linear, maps - that drive the organization's movements. It is the plans that draw or pull the organization away from the present and toward the vision. In other words, plans are what allow us to work backwards from vision to action, from the future to the present.

Some time ago, Santropol Roulant spent several months working through an intense strategic planning process. It involved an ongoing committee, but it also included many voices from within and without the organization in both formal and informal ways. Every time I talked to someone about the "strat plan," as they took to calling it, there was a tension. The process was seen as important, even vital, if the organization wanted to craft a healthy future for itself. But there seemed to be an uneasy awareness that the planning structures and approaches that they were invoking, as open and flexible as they were, were missing something. The strat plan was helping to bring out many issues and ideas within the organization, but there was often a sense that it didn't altogether *fit* the organization, at least in some important ways. Vanessa remarked one time that it seemed as if the organization was always six months ahead of the plan. Projects and initiatives were taking shape so fluidly and quickly in response to opportunities or to newly discovered skills and energies that the more methodical, linear approach of the strat plan process couldn't keep up.

Ultimately, the strat plan ended up focusing on areas of "attention" more than on

particular plans. That is, it identified themes that Roulant members felt were important for the organization's future and then offered these themes as reminders, as ways to make sure that certain things did not go unnoticed. The notion of attention fits the Roulant's focus on the present well. After all, although the strat plan was ostensibly about the future, one can only pay attention in the present. It was a clever solution to an awkward problem: how to think about the future collectively without disengaging from the present. In general, Santropol Roulant cultivates the future by *nourishing present energies*. The future doesn't pull the present; the present pushes into the future. What is being worked on at any given time is largely determined by the energies, interests, and opportunities that can be found at hand. If a project continues to collect energy and resources, it continues to grow. If it loses momentum due to lack of fit with the organization's capacities, it is allowed to lie dormant.

For example, a few years ago the Roulant was very interested in developing its ability to disseminate its ideas and practices. The organization began its typical process of starting conversations around the issue - with funders, with volunteers, with staff - hoping to generate enough human and financial resources to develop a formal dissemination program. But the project never really took off, at least not in a formal way. There was some interest, but it became clear over time that the organization wasn't ready to pursue anything large and structured in this area, particularly since discovering how to articulate what it was

that the Roulant knew and how it might be useful to other groups was very much an ongoing process. Since no particular timeline or plan was attached to the project, it was never forced into existence. It was allowed to continue to swirl about in conversations, to incubate underneath the surface of the organization.

A couple of years later, something shifted. Enough people had spent enough time working on articulating organizational themes and approaches that there was a renewed excitement about sharing those themes and approaches with other organizations. This time, however, the group that began working on the project quickly recognized that what they really wanted was not to “disseminate” ideas, but to actively engage other organizations in ongoing, two-way conversations about those ideas. The result, hopefully, would be the creation of a living, relational community of organizations, something akin to a social movement, but without the emphasis on explicit ideologies or identities. The “Living Labs” project was born, and it continues to be an integral and burgeoning part of the Roulant’s work. A project that is very much about the future, the future not only of the organization but of society as a whole, is being generated by present energy and present relationships, not by a particular and binding vision of what the future should be.

And like the past, the future lives in stories at the Roulant. When a new idea of what might be begins to form, it is passed around from person to person. Each person tells his or her own version of the story of what the new project or organizational direction might

**SANTROPOL
ROULANT
CULTIVATES
THE FUTURE BY
NOURISHING
PRESENT
ENERGIES. THE
FUTURE DOESN'T
PULL THE PRESENT;
THE PRESENT
PUSHES INTO THE
FUTURE.**

be like. These stories seed the collective imagination, and as energy and details are added to the stories, they come alive, bringing the future into the present. As enthusiasm builds, as the organization's imagination is fired, the future state becomes imminently visible *now*. The formal components of the project may not exist yet, but the relationships and the connections and the language begin to form. The essence of the project can be seen by anyone involved. It is not a matter of reading a description of the project's goals, or gazing off at some precisely defined end result. It is a matter of experiencing the feeling, the emotional architecture, of the project. Thus the project is given flesh. It becomes concrete. It begins to exist before it is visible to the kinds of measures and indicators we usually use to monitor the progress of a plan.

This reliance on emotional architecture is the opposite of the abstraction normally associated with planning. In fact, both the past and the future are themselves abstractions. When we talk about them or explore them in any way, we

must condense them to a manageable number of details. We can never experience the past or the future; we can only approximate them in language. And formal plans are perhaps the ultimate organizational abstractions, reducing an enormous array of complex and unpredictable events and energies to an articulated linear plot with precisely delineated components. In general, Santropol Roulant seems to be wary of abstraction; Allison's comments about the dangers inherent in talking about things too much bear this out. It's not that no one ever tries to write or speak about what is important in the organization or where it is going. But these efforts are generally subsidiary to the ongoing personal conversations that surround them, and in fact, they often sit a little uneasily with respect to the organization's overall motion. Like the strategic plan, these abstractions often prove useful as a way of provoking dialogue, but they can also feel as if they are missing something. Something important. And, as Allison says, if one too carelessly substitutes abstract concepts for the real, lived thing, one may even do some damage.

Returning to the notion of presence, psychological and spiritual traditions generally hold that one who is present has substituted true awareness for the scattered, dreamy abstraction in which we normally find ourselves. This is true particularly in eastern traditions, as D. T. Suzuki brilliantly illustrates by comparing two poems, one by Basho and one by Tennyson.⁹ Each poem is about the poet noticing a small flower. Basho is content to *contemplate* the flower, saying:

*When I look carefully
I see the nazuna blooming
By the hedge!*

Tennyson *plucks* the flower and says:

*Little flower – but if I could understand
What you are, root and all, and all in all,
I should know what God and man is.*

Suzuki notes that Tennyson's impulse to comprehend the flower in abstract terms is life diminishing.

It is very likely [Tennyson] had a feeling somewhat akin to that of Basho . . . But the difference between the two poets is: Basho does not pluck the flower. He just looks at it. He is absorbed in thought. He feels something in his mind, but he does not express it. He lets an exclamation mark say everything he wishes to say. For he has no words to utter; his feeling is too full, too deep, and he has no desire to conceptualize it. . . . As for Tennyson, he is active and analytical. He first plucks the flower from the place where it grows. He separates it from the ground where it belongs. .. He must tear it away from the crannied wall, 'root and all,' which means that the plant must die.

For Suzuki, the urge to “pluck” and analyze pulls one away from the moment, away from subjective experience itself. Everything is seen in a utilitarian light: How can I understand this thing and what can I do with it? The other perspective, Basho’s (and Suzuki’s), can be thought of as appreciative: How can I appreciate this thing? How can I commune with it? How can I live it? Suzuki associates the first mindset with the machine. He calls it “machine minded.”

There is no spiritual aestheticism or ethical spirituality in the machine. The machine hurries one to finish the work and reach the objective for which it is made. The work or labor in itself has no value except as the means. That is to say, life here loses its creativity and turns into an instrument, man is now a goods-producing mechanism.

I believe that the organization is the ultimate modern technology. It is the organization that is the emblematic modern machine, not the computer or the internal combustion engine or the electric light bulb. It is in organizations that we have learned most powerfully and most efficiently to translate living into output, to cede the vital present to an abstracted conception of the future. Suzuki says that “the person and the machine are contradictory concepts.” If this is true, it is profoundly paradoxical that our world is dominated by machines that are made up of persons.

Suzuki contrasts this “machine mindedness” with the “significance of the hands” - that is, with the deep meaning to be found when we remain present in the work that we do, no matter how simple it is or trivial. By focusing on the present, by invoking the past and the future only when they can enrich the present, Santropol Roulant remains visibly connected to what is vital and alive in each organizational moment. It remains visibly connected to the significance of the hands.



FROM BOUNDARIES TO SHORES

*I*n a year, so many of the faces change. Staff members venture off into new landscapes. Volunteers become staff members. Clients join. Clients pass away. And new volunteers arrive in cheerful waves, lapping up against the Roulant's wide borders . . .

I wander through the annual craft fair, smelling the olive oil and the soap, examining the jewelry and clothing and ceramic wares, listening to the dozens of voices and looking at the dozens of faces

that are moving about in the Roulant's small office. It feels like a medieval bazaar, a confederation of people and colors and sounds and smells and merchandise packed inside a tiny walled city. But the doors, as always, are open. And through them come funders, board members, staff, volunteers, clients, neighborhood residents, and people simply passing by on the street.

Today the organization is transacting with itself, exchanging gift for gift, idea for idea, greeting for greeting. That the people change from year to year, that the length and terms of association always vary, simply reinforces the feeling that here is something large and hospitable that does not depend entirely on the specific individuals who currently inhabit it. Here is something less concerned with doors and walls than with welcome.

•

I try to think about where Santropol Roulant stops. I look for its corners and its edges. I think about what is inside the Roulant and what is outside; about who belongs to it and who doesn't; and about how each category of person belongs. But in the end, it seems unimportant to define precisely who belongs, much less in what manner they belong.

Clients obviously belong in a functional way. The function of the organization is, after all, to serve them. But they belong in much deeper, more various ways than this. Leonora brings her lunch into the office every day, even though the community center program,

Carrefour des Generations, ended more than a year ago. Others stop by regularly if less frequently. And still others call on the phone almost every day, to chat, laugh, or even complain.

Certainly volunteers and staff belong, but they come and go with great irregularity and offer their gifts in any number of boundary-defying ways, as we have seen. The edges of the organization shift continuously with each new project or initiative. They shift with each new person who plays the ambassador, taking Santropol Roulant out into the world to form new connections and blur old boundaries. The Roulant has a history of filling a large portion of its staffing requirements with people working under seven-month *Emploi Québec* contracts, and this has enforced an acceptance of the fact that the organization will always involve a variety of people and need a variety of structures and programs to enable those people and to serve them.

Neighbors on the Plateau belong as well, even though Santropol Roulant is not a neighborhood organization

**THE BOUNDARIES
THAT DO EXIST ARE
OF THE MOMENT,
GENERATED BY
ANYONE WHO
WANTS TO BELONG
AND DEFINED
BY THE WAYS IN
WHICH THEY SEE
THEMSELVES AS
BELONGING.**

per se. The Roulant serves specific clients, citywide, in a specific way. It is not a general-purpose service organization for its local community. Nevertheless, it sees itself as very much a part of its local community, often holding small events for neighborhood residents, like the craft fair, and also connecting with neighborhood merchants in various ways. From this perspective, the Roulant's boundaries are small, local, face-to-face – rooted in a particular corner of a particular street in a particular neighborhood. These are humble boundaries, and content.

But Santropol Roulant has other boundaries that are bold and wide and that continue to grow. Vanessa talks a lot about conversation. The Roulant is always, and consciously, involved in a thousand conversations. Conversations with clients and volunteers, with neighbors, with policy makers and public figures, with businesses and community organizations (even “competitors”), with people who wander in off the street and with people who call from across the country. With, in short, anyone who happens to say hello and who seems interested in nurturing a relationship. More and more, the Roulant is being asked to speak about its experiences, to sit on committees and advisory boards, to work with other organizations and governmental institutions.

In the end, the organization rarely concerns itself with boundaries in any explicit, meaningful way. The boundaries that do exist are of the moment, generated by *anyone who wants to belong* and defined by *the ways in which they see themselves as belonging*. So

these boundaries are tenuous, shifting, and yet they are also permanent in that once you have declared yourself, once you have announced your belonging in word or in gesture, you continue to belong in a very real way. People come and go at Santropol Roulant only to come again. Many volunteers and clients participate in the organization for a time, move on, and then return to participate once more. And Santropol Roulant is currently working to strengthen its connection to these living ancestors of various sorts.

When boundaries are at once narrow and wide, when they are local and national, when they are temporary and permanent, when they are functional and accidental, perhaps it doesn't do to speak of boundaries at all. I like to think of the Roulant as having shorelines instead of boundaries.

Shorelines are natural, quirky, and ever changing – daily with the tide, permanently with weather, erosion, time. They change their shape and they change the nature of their contact with the sea – now soft, vegetable, permeable; now harsh, cliff-lined, yielding inches only grudgingly. And shorelines are deceptively intricate; the Atlantic border of Maine is roughly 400 kilometers long, but its Atlantic *coastline* stretches over 5600 kilometers. If you include the shores of Maine's islands, and I think it's rarely a good idea to leave islands out of your calculations, the coastline is around 9000 kilometers long, or roughly the distance from Montreal to Cairo.

Shores, unlike boundaries, are made less for protecting than for receiving. They receive serenely and without question whatever washes up: plant and bone, trash and treasure. And perhaps the most striking thing about shores is that, ultimately, they are illusions. The land never stops; it simply extends itself under water, connecting, in the end, everything with everything.

Perhaps this is a romantic view of the nature and shape of Santropol Roulant's edges, but the sense that the organization is singularly unconcerned with defining, maintaining, and defending its boundaries is hard to shake. The Roulant seems to be permeated by a genuine and unstudied sense of *welcoming* combined with a willingness to accept that the shape the organization takes today is not the shape it will take tomorrow.

The welcoming is apparent in small ways, and each act of welcome breeds another. One volunteer described how much it meant to her that when she walked into the office people tended to put down whatever they were doing for a moment and greet her. She talked about how the feeling of this greeting stayed with her as she went about her delivery runs. It helped her to slow down and to remember to offer a similarly sincere greeting to the clients. She was able to carry with her the organization's belief that the task was subsidiary to the invitation - the invitation to speak, to be heard, to be recognized.

The welcoming is also apparent in large ways. While Santropol Roulant is ambitious,

it appears singularly uncompetitive, willing to enter into conversation with any person or organization that seems interested. This willingness remains robust, even if it is difficult to see just how the person or organization might be able to align with the Roulant. It remains robust even if the person or organization appears to be competing directly with the Roulant for resources. It's important to realize, however, that this willingness to converse does not mean that the organization gives up its sense of self in order to grow. In fact, quite the reverse is true. Santropol Roulant has often turned down funding opportunities or refused project offers from larger organizations because they were not in alignment with its own interests, capacities, and beliefs. The willingness to relate is always there. But the willingness to work together in a structured way is contingent upon alignment. The same kind of relational incubation that drives the Roulant's internal project development also guides the development of projects with external organizations.

In other words, one is always welcome to enter the gravity field of the Roulant, to participate in and shape its boundaries. But the center holds. The invitation is offered in such a way that the organization's identity is never lost.



THE SOUTHERN WALL

The southern wall of Santropol Roulant is long and green, opening onto a narrow street. It is covered in beautiful, chaotic, urban graffiti: slashing, angular shapes and letters of blue and white, pink and yellow, and green on green, all overseen by a sketch of a young man feverishly pedaling a helicopter-like contraption as he flies about the city delivering food. Here are the atoms of any city in the world: people and walls,

chaos and art. On the inside of the wall there is a different kind of graffiti - organizational graffiti - and it too is alive and deeply emblematic. Everything you need to know about the Roulant seems to be captured on this wall. It bursts with menus and maps and schedules, with photos of volunteers and clients and staff, with flyers, and stories, and articles and suggestions, with plants. Everything has been made by hand: signs, borders, frames, calendars. They are crafted from nothing more than construction paper, markers and a bit of tape and glue. This is Ishfaq's wall and he is right to care whether or not he is on it, since the wall is a kind of map of the Roulant itself: the people, the projects, the narratives, the routes, the food, all arranged in organic groupings – all put together with simplicity and passion and craft.



DIS-ORGANIZING

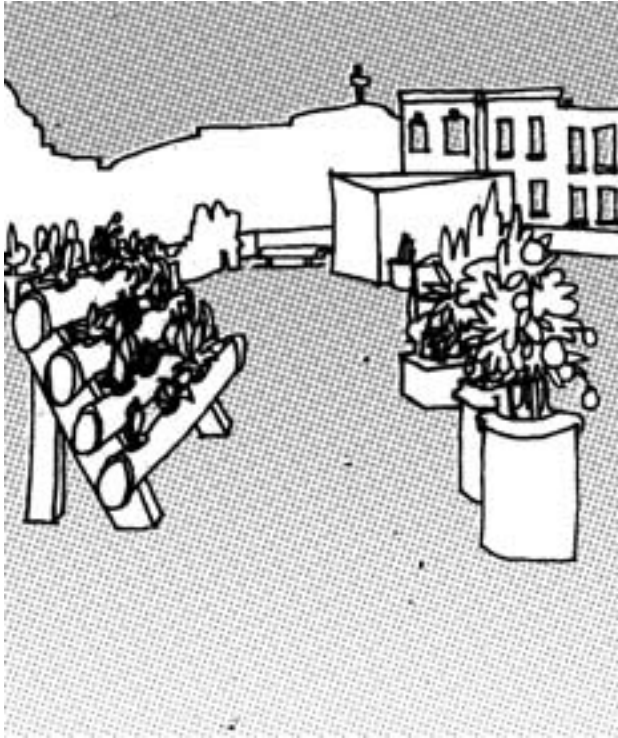
This simplicity, this handmade joy, is not the first thing that comes to mind when we think about organizations. Organizations have a way of complicating this quality, if it exists in the first place, and then of polishing and professionalizing it until it disappears. The tendency in organizations is to grow ever more sophisticated, moving away from anything that might be thought of as handcrafted and personal.

All of the five themes I've explored in this paper - from contract to commitment, from roles to gifts, from routines to rhythm, from plans to presence, and from boundaries to shores – can be thought of as dis-organizing themes in that they challenge the fundamental assumptions we have about why organizations exist in the first place and how they maintain coherence. Classical organization theory was built on the premise that an organization is a formalized, contractual, role system, with clear boundaries, performing its work by means of routines encoded in the past and strategic plans inscribed on the future. And most organizations still see themselves in these terms. That is, while they may acknowledge that there are other forces at work, they see the traditional forces or parameters mentioned above as what hold the organization together. This is particularly true when there is trouble. In a crisis, we frequently revert to formal, technical approaches – more rigid roles, clearer boundaries, better plans – to combat the forces that we interpret as pulling the organization apart – informal, unruly power structures, illicit alliances, lack of a clear strategy.

Underlying this reaction is our belief that the first rule of organizations is survival. We believe that organizations must protect themselves before they can go about their business. Thus all of an organization's energies and structures become instrumental. People, other organizations, communities, and governments become tools in service to the organization. Even the organization's own mission, rather than a *reason* for being, becomes the *means* of

being - the thing that allows the organization to continue to exist in the world.

The open, invitational, nature of Santropol Roulant's culture, the willingness to attract those who would be attracted, to give to them and to allow them to give, is of a different nature entirely. At Santropol Roulant, there seems to be a collective awareness of the beauty and goodness of such an invitation, apart from its utility. The invitation is in many ways an end in itself. In a deep and immediate way, Santropol Roulant's very mission is to welcome and to serve, not necessarily to survive. Vanessa frequently says that it's okay for Santropol Roulant not to live forever, that should it die, the energy and value it has created in the world would not die with it. Modern organizational theory has very little to say about this kind of spiritual structure. And until it steps away from thinking of organizational survival as the foundational principle and transcendental mission of all organizations, it will continue to be relatively mute about such topics. It is worthwhile to ask whether giving up the organizational attachment to *staying* alive is a necessary prelude to the organization's actually *being* alive.



COHERENCE

If the fundamental nature of Santropol Roulant involves a particular way of being in the world rather than a particular way of staying in the world, what prevents the Roulant from turning into the kind of organization that becomes so focused on its own values and processes that it becomes narcissistic, unable to *do* much of anything at all? This kind of over-internalization is common enough among so-called values-based organizations – a

turning inward that ultimately leaves the organization anything but engaged.

It is helpful here to understand that the five themes I've outlined are not necessarily distinct values, each with its own effect. In fact, I believe that to separate them is to misunderstand the nature of engagement. They can only be understood in relation to each other. For example, if an organization is focused on its own way of being and does not have the kind of boundary flexibility and role flexibility that Santropol Roulant has, its rigid boundaries can prevent its way of being from evolving or even from finding appropriate expression in the different contexts in which the organization is working. At Santropol Roulant, new people and organizations enter the picture all the time and they consistently change the dynamic of the conversation (though not its ultimate nature) making it alive and pliable and capable of responding to ever-new contexts.

Similarly, an organization that has fluid boundaries might turn into a chaotic mess with no center, buffeted one way or the other at the slightest change of context, if it did not have the kind of deep awareness of the present that Santropol Roulant has. It is the awareness of what is called for, what is appropriate right now, that gives the Roulant's fluid boundaries structure and coherence. Each individual theme can have its own pathology. It is the dynamic of the themes working together that seems to allow the kind of sustained engagement Santropol Roulant has experienced.

But even this kind of synergetic perspective may be a bit misleading. It's my feeling that these themes are better understood not as separate, balancing, energies, but as various expressions of *one* fundamental quality or movement. The five themes I've outlined are all, to a great degree, holographic. A three dimensional holographic image has the unusual property that each part of the image contains the whole. If you slice off any random chunk of a piece of film on which a holographic image has been imprinted and look through that small piece, you'll still see the whole image. You will be looking at it from a particular vantage point, but the whole thing will be there. This is in contrast to traditional photography. If you tear off a corner of a regular negative of a picture of your dog, and that corner happens to contain the dog's paw, then all you will see when you look through that piece of the negative is the dog's paw. Each *component* of the image has its own separate space. This sort of traditional image structure is comparable to the surface structure of an organization; we usually think of this structure in terms of its components, whether they be functions or roles, products or markets. So in terms of producing food, the kitchen at Santropol Roulant is nothing like the office (one produces food and the other doesn't). Neither is the volunteer delivery person like the executive director (one delivers food and the other doesn't, at least not as a rule).

The five themes, however, cannot be thought of as components of anything nor are they embedded in any particular structure. Again, they seem to operate holographically, working

across multiple levels of the organization all at once. The movement from contract to commitment, for example, can be seen in staff meetings, kitchen shifts, client relationships, volunteer relationships, festivals, projects, etc. And at the macro level, the organization itself, as it develops relationships with other organizations, also generally relates via commitment (e.g., long-term, open-ended, intimate relationships with funders in which the two-way exchange of energy is more important than any immediate funding opportunity). So this theme can be seen as essentially holographic; wherever you slice the organization, from whatever perspective you view it, there it is.

Similarly, we can talk about a holographic gift ecology at Santropol Roulant rather than a role system, and this ecology also functions at the micro and macro levels. The Roulant is just as focused on giving at the *interorganizational* level as it is at the *intraorganizational* level. The rhythm theme is likewise holographic, in that cooking, meeting, special event, budgetary, planning, and funding cycles all are more rhythmic than routinized. The presence theme is holographic in that it infuses daily interactions and large-scale organizational initiatives alike. And the boundaries theme is holographic in that all of the boundaries at the Roulant - personal, functional, organizational, interorganizational - are essentially invitational rather than protective.

Thus at this holographic level of organizational architecture, it no longer makes sense to talk about components. Instead, each person or act or organizational level can be thought of

as a full *expression* of the theme rather than a component or part of that theme.

Now an interesting property of holographic images is that they require a *coherent* light source to produce - that is, a light source from one point and of one precise wavelength (color). Not until the invention of lasers (which are highly coherent light sources) were we able to make high-quality holographic images. Similarly, we can speculate that any deep organizational theme that appears to be truly holographic in nature comes from a common, more fundamental quality. Why? Because it is hard to imagine the kind of deep-seated, shared coherence exhibited at every level of the organization as coming from multiple sources. Humans are simply too complicated to happily, deeply, and consistently align around a large number of themes or issues. I imagine that this kind of alignment can only come from something connected to the very nature of our humanness, something that we all share, something that is indeed holographic within us. So a holographic theme, I

**I IMAGINE THAT THIS
KIND OF ALIGNMENT
CAN ONLY COME
FROM SOMETHING
CONNECTED TO THE
VERY NATURE OF
OUR HUMANNESS,
SOMETHING THAT
WE ALL SHARE,
SOMETHING
THAT IS INDEED,
HOLOGRAPHIC
WITHIN US.**

believe, is an engaging theme, and this engagement comes from something fundamental to our very nature, some one deep quality that is essential to who and what we are.

Is there anything to say about this one quality itself? I'm not sure. We can dance around it with words like connection, wholeness, creativity, openness, even love. But it is my feeling that exploring its multifarious expressions in specific, grounded, contexts is paradoxically more likely to illuminate this universal energy than going at it directly. The best art generally takes a sideways approach to the largest things, exploring the universal through the intimate details of the specific and accidental. A similar caginess may be called for in organization studies.

And here, we let the themes go, for if they are indeed simply diverse ways of understanding something more universal, then clearly they shouldn't be given too much weight in and of themselves. They are interpretations – in this case *my* interpretations – of patterns. Presumably there are many other ways to describe similarly engaging patterns. Particular interpretations of the patterns, and the precise language used to explore them, are not important as such; they are only important for what they evoke.



HOW TO CHANGE THE WORLD

Why does Santropol Roulant matter? Is the organization more than simply a pleasant place to work, a happy accident for those who find themselves within its reach? If so, what does it have to teach us about the personal, social, and economic themes we care most about? What does it have to say about our collective ability to innovate, to create meaningful social change?

Cleverness is not in short supply in our

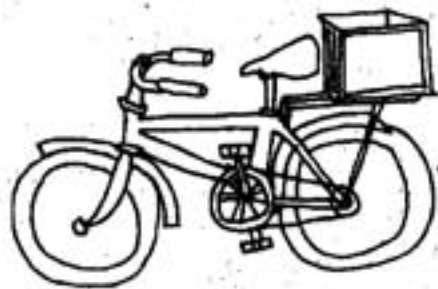
society. The speed with which we innovate and the magnitude of our innovations attest to that. But many of our innovations, perhaps most, seem to be devoid of real meaning. At their worst, they can even be quite destructive. They leave us no happier than we were before, and we wonder why we can't seem to solve our biggest, most urgent problems, despite all of our inventiveness. My hunch is that as long as we think about the innovation process as a *problem solving process*, we will continue to be beset by clever, but empty and ultimately untamable "advancements." Perhaps the key is seeing innovation not as a way of solving problems but as a way of organizing ourselves, or more simply, a way of being together.

Innovations are rooted in organizations. Ideas may come from solitary geniuses, but innovations, by definition, are communal. And I would argue that *meaningful* innovations are rooted in *engaging* organizations. Innovations that respond to our deepest needs, innovations that answer our deepest questions, can only come from organizational systems that are connected to those needs, those questions. Social innovation springs, unbidden and with great energy, from organizations like Santropol Roulant. And it doesn't feel necessary to control and correct the innovations that are born in this way. It doesn't feel necessary to regulate them.

As an organization becomes more deeply engaged with the world and with itself, it can achieve something we might label authenticity. To be authentic is to be genuine, to be

original, to be unique. One of the oldest meanings of the word is “having original authority.” Profound social change requires this kind of authority.

Authentic organizations can't be recognized by their outward appearance or their formal characteristics. An authentic organization is a work of genius, and it is the only kind of genius I know of that is collective. Like all works of genius, authentic organizations are quirky, strange, even slightly absurd. They cannot be replicated. They have the kind of rough-hewn, hand-made quality that I have described. That is why I speak of themes and not structures or forms. And that is why I think it is worthwhile to continue to explore those themes – to continue to ask the question: “Why are some organizations so alive, so present, so whole?”



I am talking to Leonora. She's just walked in to have her lunch at the Roulant, as she does every day. She's sitting on the couch in the corner of the office. Today she has a bad headache, but she sits up straight, as always, peaceful and tuned in.

Her voice with its soft Caribbean tones never loses its music or its politeness. She talks about her life, her childhood, her move to Montreal. The many decades lap up against each other gently. Every once in a while, she offers an unexpected proverb of her own: "As long as God love you, you're not poor." Or, "You're not ugly. God made you in his image."

She wonders at the isolated way people seem to live in North America. "Everybody in their own apartment. Not like me country. Everyone sit outside, say good morning."

She looks around the Roulant's humble office, takes in the people and the movement and the sunshine, then looks back at me. "So I come here. Everybody is so nice. Every person. If the world was like that, that would be good."

Later we both head home. Leonora slowly walks south, and I go east across rue St. Laurent, that street that shares its name with a river and a saint.

The river still flows on into the Atlantic, offering and emptying itself, but remaining full. The saint died with wit and grace, asking his executioners to turn him on the fire so that his left side would be cooked as well as his right. It is like that sometimes. A joke told on a funeral pyre becomes a story. A murmur on a mountain becomes a sea.

REFERENCES

1. McMaster, Michael D. 1996. *The Intelligence Advantage: Organizing for Complexity*. Boston: Butterworth-Heinemann.
2. Santropol Roulant. 2002. *Draft Grant Application*. Montreal.
3. Gatto, John Taylor. 1992. *Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling*. Philadelphia: New Society Publishers.
4. Santropol Roulant. 2001. *Annual Report*. Montreal.
5. Simon, Herbert A. 1997. *Administrative Behavior: A Study of Decision-making Processes in Administrative Organizations*. New York: Free Press.
6. Berger, Peter L., and Thomas Luckmann. 1967. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.
7. Whyte, David. 1994. *The Heart Aroused: Poetry and the Preservation of the Soul in Corporate America*. New York: Currency Doubleday.
8. Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. 1990. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper & Row.
9. Suzuki, D.T. 1960. *Studies in Zen*. London: Unwin Paperbacks.

