

Bursting Bubbles: Opening Your Space to a Larger World.

Harrison Owen
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We are born in a bubble, which creates our territory, and defines our starting point on the journey of life. Normally, we think warmly of our bubble: our family, our friends, the town we grew up in, our place of worship, the language we speak, the national story of the country in which we were born. There is, however, another side of the bubble... powerfully captured by Rogers and Hammerstein in *South Pacific*.

*You've got to be taught
To hate and fear,
You've got to be taught
From year to year,
It's got to be drummed
In your dear little ear
You've got to be carefully taught.*

*You've got to be taught to be afraid
Of people whose eyes are oddly made,
And people whose skin is a different shade,
You've got to be carefully taught.*

*You've got to be taught before it's too late,
Before you are six or seven or eight,
To hate all the people your relatives hate,
You've got to be carefully taught.*

From our earliest moments, we are enmeshed in a cocoon of stories which shape and protect, and simultaneously separate us from the unknown “Other.” This is Evolution at work, providing our social DNA and shielding us from potential harm. However, as in every evolutionary process, some unneeded, dangerous baggage is carried along. There is no reason for us to feel guilty, for we individually bear no responsibility for the baggage. It is simply a “given,” the starting point of the life we are about to live. However, we **become** responsible as our life is lived and our consciousness increases. Protective fear of the *other* becomes racism when we cling to a story for no reason other than the fact that we were “carefully taught.”

All people begin in this storied world. We exist within a spectrum of narratives, ranging from the spectacular/heroic to the horrific/diabolic. The great triumphs of individuals and cultures are there to inspire us: Einstein and Akhnaten, the Renaissance and the CyberAge. There are also stories of “the other.” Depending on who we are – The Other could be White People, Black People, Indians, Chinese, Swedes, Germans, Americans, or all of the above. The associated images and tales are always somewhat nervous-making, and may be down right horrific. Norwegians are known to be careful and suspicious around Swedes, and those Americans old enough to remember the 2nd World War will recall the terror inspired by the hideous images of the Japanese. Racism can come in many colors, shapes and images. No one is immune.

To eliminate the abstraction, let me tell you about my bubble. It has provided many blessings and multiple curses. Finding my way through to life beyond the bubble has been the adventure of my existence. It isn't over, but everything started in my bubble.

I didn't ask for it – didn't even know it existed. Like it or not, my bubble will be my life's companion. I have discovered, however, that the full potential of my life can only be glimpsed as the bubble is acknowledged and transcended. That is a beginning – however, there are bubbles, within bubbles, within....

I am a WASP – that is *White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant* – raised on the Main Line in Philadelphia, Socially Registered, attended Episcopal (Anglican) schools, went to an Episcopal seminary, and on to graduate school. I learned a massive amount, and was so protected that I was rarely, if ever, aware of that protective separation from the world most people inhabit. Then, thank God, it all fell apart.

It all fell apart in a pain filled moment. I lost my marriage, my job, my career, and my mind. The details are unimportant, but there was a day when I stood on the banks of a river and threw my wedding ring in the water. That ring was the last vestige of the world I had known. In the moment – that precise moment – standing by the river – everything I had was gone. It hurt in ways I had never hurt before.

There was nothing ... which turned out to be a huge blessing. With everything gone, I was thrown open to worlds I never knew existed. Subsequently I have crossed the continents of our planet to live and work with villagers in mud huts and people of substantial means. Curiously, I never once felt as a stranger. To be sure there were many times I understood not a word, but I was never alone. When my bubble broke, I found not only my humanity, but more profoundly, the rich humanity surrounding me – which was previously invisible.

Life in a bubble is a universal experience. In India the Brahmins separate from the Untouchables. In the UK, The Royals look down upon Commoners. The Chinese consider western (white) people as barbarians, and we in the West reciprocate, viewing them as heathen. The several bubbles do protect, and curiously, each in their own way add strangely to the rich

fabric of humanity. These bubbles, however, also repeat the old refrain from Rogers and Hart, “You have to be carefully taught.”

Every generation hears the old song anew, and experiences the continuing possibility of Racism. Equally, all generations have the possibility of breaking barriers and discovering new realms of humanity. We have the choice.

The evils of Racism are clear. Strong societies are shattered and scarcely a war starts with out the universal propellant – the searing hatred of Racism. In every situation lives are destroyed. That destruction may initially be limited to a small group, but ultimately it will destroy the whole. In a word, Racism is genocide. The choice is ours to make.

Why do we choose genocide? To be perfectly honest, I don’t have a clue – some theories perhaps, but nothing that can explain the reality. However, I have some thoughts about breaking through our bubbles. Actually, I have Five Principles and a One Law.

You may recognize the Principles and Law as integral to Open Space Technology (OST)¹, which could lead to the assumption that the way out of our troubles is the practice of this minimalist group intervention. That would not be wrong, but it does limit the application of the Principles and Law to OST. In fact they apply to all of life, and can effectively combat the effects of Racism and Prejudice.

OST is a 37 year natural experiment with thousands of iterations and millions of participants on all continents save Antarctica. It is unique for its simplicity and impact. Participants, in groups of 2 to multiple thousands, sharing a common concern (the future of their country, marriage, company, neighborhood ...), sit in a circle, post their issues of concern on a bulletin board, open a market place to negotiate time and place of meeting, and go to work. Typically, the opening ceremonies take an hour with no person in charge, no prior agenda, and no training. At the end of a day (or two), bitter combatants can be seen embracing and sharing a full set of proceedings to guide their future.

I have called this a “natural experiment” because OST was never designed to test anything. Indeed, the procedure and results are so far outside the conventionally accepted limits of organizational behavior that few would have considered the possibility of doing anything like it, even experimentally. Truthfully, OST really wasn’t designed. Except for the influence of two martinis, it just happened. But once it happened, the natural experiment was under way, and we have learned a massive amount.

The first run was in 1985, and since that time most people who just hear about it are convinced that it is fantasy. Those who were there as participants have a very different take. They

¹ See *Open Space Technology: A User’s Guide*, 3rd Edition, Berrett-Koehler

know that something (some say, *life changing*) happened – even if they are hard pressed to say what, why, or how.

We have spent the last 37 years trying to figure what makes OST work. I believe there are a few answers emerging, but dealing with all that would divert us from the primary concern – mitigating the scourge of Racism. However, Five Principles and A Law have emerged from our adventure, which may be helpful.

The Principles

- 1)Whoever comes are the right people.
- 2) Whatever happens is the only thing that could have.
- 3)Whenever it starts is the right time.
- 4)Wherever it happens is the right place.
- 5) When it's over it's over.

The Law (of mobility)

If you find yourself neither learning nor contributing,
Find a new place. Follow what has heart and meaning.

The Principles are oddly named, for they are less about things to *do* than about things to keep in mind as one journeys along the way. Without going through the whole list, see if the first one (*Whoever comes are the right people*) has a any resonance in your life experience.

At first take, I would guess there would be “no take.” But think again. When a group is invited to work together on a deep problem, no small amount of time is devoted to insure that the “right” people are there. But when the gathering convenes, who shows up? The simple answer is, “those who cared to come.” All the rest, no matter their qualifications, were no-shows. If a solution emerges, who did it? Those who cared! At the end of the day, and no matter the effort expended vetting the attendance list, the RIGHT people for that gathering were those who cared to come. And that could include total strangers.

Of course, you could attribute the composition of the group to serendipity, a lucky shot, so to speak. Your assessment is predictable because we have all been carefully taught that an effective gathering can only take place when the right, pre-selected people are in attendance. This is why we spend endless hours making the list and calling them twice, thrice, or worse. But no matter the effort, the result is always the same: those who came are those who cared to do so. Perhaps we could save a lot of time by simply issuing an invitation broadly to all those who *might* care to come, and then see who shows up? Or as I said, “Whoever comes is the right people.” A blinding flash of the obvious!

All of the other principles share this “blinding flash of the obvious” quality. They are so blatantly true as to need no justification, indeed they seem so obvious that a rational person might

be tempted to ask why bother to state them at all? The reason is hidden beneath their obvious simplicity – an intense focus on the *present moment*. Once we are alerted to the fact that “whoever comes are the right people,” there really is no point in worrying about all the other folks who might have come, could have come, or should have come. The only ones who count are those who are here NOW²...

... and NOW is a very funny thing. On the one hand it is everything we have and, simultaneously, hardly anything at all. The past is gone, and the future hasn't happened yet – all we have is NOW. And Now can easily disappear in the busyness of life. We desperately try to fit everything in – leaving us with an impossible schedule, and no time or space to breath. NOW becomes the fleeting second between our present activity and the next event. There is no time/space for us and much less for strangers. Strangers remain strange, unknown and unseen, and our NOW is very small.

What does all this have to do with Racism and Prejudice? When the NOW is restricted, life loses its particularity. The individuals we encounter become blurred particles covered by the conflicted maelstrom of real and imagined stories that we were carefully taught. However, when our attention is focused on the present moment – each person appears as a unique individual, no matter the color of their skin, the shape of their eyes, or the language they speak. It is a very different, much larger world. We can enter this world at will, by following the Five Principles. Each one has a slightly different impact, but you will get the idea by starting with the first one: *Whoever comes is the right person*. The remaining Principles focus our attention on new aspects of the NOW (purpose, time and place).

Then we come to the Law of Mobility. Like the 5 Principles, the Law is odd, but in its own unique fashion. Seemingly the law requires us to do what everybody has been taught is a No-No. Leaving when bored is not polite. At the same time, the Law, like the principles, is a blinding flash of the obvious. Despite the impropriety, everybody does it. The law simply requires us to do what we would do anyhow – but with the cover of the law we needn't feel guilty about it.

A little explanation is in order. Please recall the last boring meeting you were forced to attend. It was too hot, and the speaker went on and on about something you cared nothing about – you did try to pay attention, but regardless of your effort, you suddenly found yourself far, far away... on a beach, at a friend's house, taking a nap ... anywhere but imprisoned at that dreadful meeting. However, your reverie was interrupted by the sound of your own snoring. You had definitely departed the meeting only to suffer the scorn of your fellows. Would it not have been better for all concerned if you had quietly walked out?

The importance of *The Law of Mobility* goes beyond its shock value as another blinding flash of the obvious. If the Five Principles alert us to the dimensions of the NOW in which we

²See *Expanding Our Now*, Berrett-Koehler

can encounter life as it really is, freed from all the tales and narratives we have been carefully taught – The Law reminds us of our responsibility to engage that life and offers the critical means to do so. The law says “If at any time you find yourself neither learning nor contributing, find a new place.” This is about exploring the NOW.

However, for many of us, seriously encountering the NOW can be disorienting. Suddenly we discover that most of what we have taken as true, isn't that way. Our enemies become human, even friends, Previously threatening skin color appears beautiful, odd customs and language become almost familiar. Strange indeed, and how do you find your way when all the old sign posts have disappeared?

The answer? *Follow what has heart and meaning!* Admittedly, this sounds disgracefully hedonistic. And it is! The law requires that we pursue what makes us happy and fulfilled. Obviously this is the perfect prescription for total chaos and disaster. If every one did only what they wanted to do, nothing useful would ever get done – or so we think.

But think again. Remember that there are 8 billion of us on the planet – each person finding what has “heart and meaning” in unique and different ways. With 8 billion caring people, a lot of territory is covered. Fortunately, not everybody cares about the same thing. For example, some people actually love Accounting. I don't. There are even people who care about stuff that nobody else wants to care about ... Mother Teresa and her friends. Or, faced with a room full of 4 year olds, I would run in terror – while others experience the cacophony as a symphony of angels.

Last but not least, a critical caveat: Five Principles and One Law cannot candy coat our world. It is true that we often make difficult situations worse with our prejudicial tales. It is equally true that massively destructive people and things inhabit our global neighborhood. Recognizing those threats clearly, and dealing with them forthrightly is essential. Doing so becomes infinitely more effective when the fog of Racism and Prejudice does not cloud our judgement.