LIBERATING VOICES

A Pattern Language for Communication Revolution

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Preface

Growing up in a middle-class neighborhood in Los Angeles, I frequently heard comments like, "When I was young, we never locked our doors," which I ascribed to clueless adults. (I had an attitude before I knew that a person could have one.) Another one was the hackneyed observation that "the weather has been weird lately." Even at that age, I was enough of a scientist to sense that any single weather anomaly didn't constitute "weird weather."

I had other prejudices in addition to my overflowing bounty of skepticism for the sensibilities of adults. One notable prejudice was my distaste for the volumes of inflexible rules that I had not written or otherwise ratified whose sole purpose (apparently) was to make life uninteresting and mechanical. For whatever reason, the forbidden activities generally had infinitely more allure than the ones that were ordained.

Now, forty years later, my own children are returning the favor of questioning the rules that I present as received wisdom. Beyond this, both kids (now moving inexorably into grown-upness) are seemingly always on the ready to point out the staleness of my jokes or the feebleness with which I attempt to understand their slang.

Besides indulging my nostalgic reflections on the process of moving from youth to maturity (who me?!) I believe that there are some relevant observations that can be made based on this brief look backward.

One observation, of course, is the strength and durability of one's own prejudices—and the difficulty of understanding them, let alone circumventing them. My parents, for example, may have had some good advice for me from time to time. It is also possible that I would have something reasonable to share with the next generation. But for all of that, the mental and emotional wall that I had erected (or was erected for me by, say, genes or brain chemistry) provided a profound filter on what I heard and what meaning, if any, I assigned to what I heard that I will never be able to fully understand. Individually and collectively, we are all locked into systems of interpretation that make it difficult to change our mental and other habits, even when our very existence is threatened.

Another observation is that I, like other people, believed implicitly that the current state (youth, for example) was eternal; the world was out there and was a given; the rules could

be resisted but not actually changed. In general things actually do not change—especially at the behest of people. In other words, the weather never really gets "weird."

Of course, if anybody asked me if I thought that things change, I would have answered affirmatively. Deep inside, however, I believed that the 1950s (my earliest years) were eternal, and although the 1960s were quite unlike the decade that preceded them, I never totally got beyond the idea that the world was on automatic. (And "history"—at least the way it was taught and my abiding conviction that it was unalterably tedious—did nothing to alleviate my feeling that humankind was inexorably plodding through the millennia.)

Of course I am asserting that I am not the only person to have these feelings. I am also suggesting that groups of people, organizations, and institutions are also likely to share these feelings, including the immaturity of thinking that what they do is right and that any and all other approaches are wrong. Unfortunately dogged inertia and other shortcomings of human beings are not particularly newsworthy. Throughout humankind's epochs-long trudge, there has been a sort of dreary meta-stability: the more things changed, the more they stayed the same. Although there were indications that this could change, certainly the specter of humankind actually destroying the world—or at least profound chunks of it—was not something that we could plausibly contemplate until quite recently. That was God's job!

I have reluctantly come to acknowledge that many of the myths of childhood may not be true, even if the majority of the people in the world still cleave to them. People can change rules, and they can change their habits. And more rules and habits can be changed and more people can be engaged in the process—if they choose to. Human existence does not have to mean an eternal treadmill of futility. Nor does exploitation of nature and other people have to be the defining characteristic of our species.

I have been fortunate to have witnessed—and even, quixotically, to have tried to influence—an exciting and unparalleled period of technological creativity. We have witnessed the unveiling and widespread adoption of an amazing and unprecedented communication system that can theoretically connect not only all inhabitants on earth, but also the world's culture and knowledge, including an immense amount of scientific data on our planet and beyond that presumably could be put to good use. If, however, we set aside these rose-colored glasses, a host of challenges awakes us from our reverie. These challenges are so immense that if we are honest with ourselves, we must readily admit that they may yet undo all that has been built. For the first time in our long history, we have the means by which to bring about global destruction. The two sides of our nature—intellect, creativity, and understanding versus greed, suspicion, and violence—are now starkly pitted against each other. Our social creativity must now at least equal our technological creativity. We are going to need all the help we can get.

We can count on the Internet for some of this help—not the Internet exactly as it is now, or the Internet in the absence of other communication and information systems (public libraries, for example), or the Internet as a magical force that does the right thing by itself, without human intention or interaction, but the Internet as one aspect of an information

and communication fabric animated by human intelligence and the need to address shared concerns. It will not be easy. The agenda now seems to be largely driven by parochial desires and short-term needs. I am dismayed (but not surprised) by the corporate dedication to colonizing the Internet and making it ''theirs'' and not ''ours,'' just another aspect, of course, of their hugely successful campaign to concentrate media ownership in a few hands. I am similarly disappointed (but not necessarily surprised) by the hordes of incredibly brilliant people toiling in the vineyards of the computer industry who are unwilling or unable to contemplate what a truly responsive Internet might look like, to think beyond their company's bottom line and whatever slogan or mantra is making its rounds among the cyber-cognoscenti at the moment.

The Internet is and is likely to continue to be a reflection of humanity, with its myriad needs, prejudices, and interests. This will encompass the sacred and the profane, the authentic, thoughtful and healing, as well as the close-minded, venal, and violent. Without conscious intervention, the Internet will likely reflect and succumb to the power structures that currently exist outside it, a complex of resources and institutional inertia that supports the desires of the few over the needs of the many.

Of course, everything moved too fast to monitor (let alone understand) it all. Moreover, my personal prejudices colored everything I have witnessed, just as other people's prejudices colored what they witnessed. In some cases, I was not surprised: the nearly immediate commercialization of the Internet, for example. I was disappointed when the National Science Foundation decided to commercialize the Internet with no public discussion. I was saddened by the silence of civil society that was unaware of the momentous decisions that were being made before it was possible for ordinary people to have any idea of what they might be losing. In other cases, I was surprised and thoroughly impressed with the resilience, brilliance, and dedication of civil society that was appropriating the Internet for their work striving against (at least the way I see it) militarism, greed, bumbling leadership, insensitivity, racism, and the other isms. The rapid growth of community networks was exciting, as was the explosive growth of Indymedia. The Internet will undoubtedly continue to reflect the wide dimensions of humankind in some unequal sense. But we can demand more. What is stopping us from developing something that is more like an *agora* that supports education, deliberation, mutual problem solving, and the free expression of ideas for everybody, and less like a shopping channel raised to some infinite power?

Engaging in this type of work is a little like straddling an immense chasm with technology development on one side and social activism on the other. I have always thought that the two sides belonged together, but there seemed to be immense pressure to choose one over the other. And choosing one is tempting; for one thing, the rules of the game are clearer for either of the two sides than they are for the murky place where the two sides overlap. Working in the computer industry or having a voice in the technological direction it goes seems to require unquestioning faith in the product it is producing. But a little voice keeps barging in that reminds me of my reservations. On the other side of the chasm is the skeptical voice

that says that technology cannot solve problems by itself, that technology is often a distraction, and that much of the rhetoric is self-serving hype.

Occasionally this voice has gotten me in trouble. It has spiked job opportunities on a few occasions, but mostly it has just annoyed people. I was not playing along and ''didn't get it.'' I was just trying to be difficult. And so on. It was this little voice, however, that reminded me that the Internet does not replace face-to-face relationships. It was this little voice that said that new does not equate to good, no more than old means good. But following this voice to its logical extremes was not appropriate either. The little voice must be tempered with other voices. If, for example, the trajectory of the Internet is shaped only by the technocrats because the more socially motivated wanted to retain their technological virginity, the Internet would be even less likely to meet society's real needs.

The technocratic, corporate, and neoliberal rhetoric has been intense, and some has been quite articulate and persuasive. I have watched as the rhetoric took hold and had immense power over the first generation of the Internet released from the labs. Acknowledging the absolutely critical importance of information and communication, *and acting on this knowledge,* is key to selecting from humankind's possible futures.

About the Patterns

I was amazed to see how quickly this pattern language book project started to come together when it actually started to really come together. And it was exciting to see how the authors became suddenly aware—and pleasantly surprised—that their patterns connected with other patterns in the book much more deeply and coherently than they had anticipated.

Since the way we use the terms *pattern* and *pattern language* in this book may be misleading, I'll describe both briefly here and revisit them in more depth later. It should be noted that we owe a tremendous debt to Christopher Alexander who developed both concepts, which were used to great effect in his magisterial book about architecture and urban planning, *A Pattern Language* (Alexander, Ishikawa, and Silverstein 1977). A *pattern* is a concise discussion of a solution to a problem in some area of focus, which in our case is information and communication for social change. A pattern contains suggestions about how to think about solving the problem and about how to take action to alleviate the problem. Each pattern is presented in a consistent format: each has a title, a description of the problem it is designed to address, the context within which it is used, and a discussion that explores the motivation for the pattern and how the pattern can be put to use. A *pattern language* is an organized collection of patterns that together express a broad coherent response to a large number of related problems. In many, if not all, cases, people will use several patterns in conjunction with each other when trying to solve a particular problem.

While it can honestly be said that the pattern language described in this book is the work of hundreds of people, who built on the musings, experiments, and struggles of thousands more, the final responsibility for this enterprise must fall on me. Pattern authors are respon-

sible for their individual patterns, but many of the patterns and the chapters before and after chapter 8, which contains the patterns, are mine. Some of the authors are more ''radical'' than I am, while others are less so. I say this because I feel obligated to provide the coauthors with whatever distance from me or the other authors they may want or need. Some will feel that I was too critical, and some will feel that I was too timid. Nonetheless, I believe that most, if not all of them, support on some level the audacious objective of this book: to play some meaningful role in the repair of an increasingly dysfunctional world.

Although the structure of the patterns promotes a degree of consistency, there is a difference in styles among them, a pleasant reminder of the diversity of viewpoints. Also, the examples are unequally drawn from U.S. experience or, for that matter, built on examples in Seattle, where I live. Ideally there would be an even distribution of coverage around the world. To this end, I have tried to use examples from outside the United States whenever possible. But even in the age of the Internet, the local exists—and I hope it always will.

I wanted to apologize for not mentioning all of the great projects around the world that demonstrate aspects of the patterns It is a testament to humankind's engaged compassion and intelligence that a book even one hundred times this size could not contain them all. I also want to apologize for the limited space that was allotted for individual patterns. The page limit was restrictive, but everybody did their part to keep the size of the book manageable. The *Liberating Voices* Web site, http://www.publicsphereproject.org/patterns/, should help to rectify these unavoidable transgressions. On the Web site, pattern authors can expand their patterns almost indefinitely. Other people can contribute new patterns that they believe are supportive of the broader effort. Generally we are envisioning the site as a shared resource that will help various communities use the pattern language effectively and to help them interact with others around the world on the evolving communications revolution project.

The Future of the Patterns

What is needed in the years ahead? Of course, the other contributors to this effort and I would like to secure support for this work as a whole. Ideally the patterns will be used more as patterns, and we will have an opportunity to evaluate their effectiveness. This should help improve the patterns and the pattern language accordingly. Ultimately we hope that civil society will be strengthened through the use of the patterns this book. This project places faith in the people, and nothing of any magnitude can be accomplished without them.

We are also hoping to convene face-to-face meetings on the pattern language and related projects. The conscious development of collective intelligence is an intriguing possibility, and I hope that this book can play a role. It will be interesting to see how the pattern authors and others in the community can devise new ways of working together to make progress on their goals.

Ideally this book would have been, like its predecessor, *A Pattern Language* (1977) by Christopher Alexander, Sara Ishikawa, and Murray Silverstein, a work of art and a work of genius. Although this book has likely fallen short of that goal, the work it describes, however imperfectly, does not fall short of those high honors. The active, engaged, intelligent, and possibly naive work that information and communication activists are taking on throughout the world is becoming increasingly widespread. The application of nonviolent and just principles to help build a world that works for all is noble and beautiful. Who knows? The vast, principled, ad hoc, and largely uncoordinated project that millions of people are working on might succeed. It is one project, and we are allies. A better world is possible.