

From collaboration to co-creation in Interfaith and inter-cultural work

By Justine Huxley

What's the most exciting experience you've had collaborating across differences in faith, culture, and ideology? Have you ever entered into collaborative relationships and been truly surprised by the result? What enabled those experiences to happen?

In a group I facilitate at St Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace, in London, someone recently asked, "What's the difference between collaboration and co-creation?" Here is the answer I liked the most: In collaboration, you and your associates work together. You start off with an idea of what you want to achieve, and the result is not too dissimilar from your original idea. In co-creation, you and your collaborators are inviting in an extra element – the 'field,' the interrelated system around and within us, the web of life, or perhaps God (insert whatever language you use for That which is beyond yourself) – and the result is something new, something none of you could have predicted.

That description echoes my experience of working with what is called **Emergent Design**. There is a quality of aliveness, of being in new territory, of holding a space for something beyond ourselves to bring itself into existence, of reorganizing us and our relationships, bestowing results according to a deeper wisdom that we cannot access on our own. It is a much more exciting way to work. As my fellow co-creator at St Ethelburga, Debbie Warrener, says, "It invites more humility and less attachment to particular outcomes. **It's a way of listening to a wider deeper dimension in the creative process. Consciously bringing this in can be a powerful way to bridge differences and gently sidestep egos, competition, and more personal triggers that can come up when working closely together with others.**"

A story of co-creation.

Last year in London, we brought together a vibrant group of around 40 sincere and committed young adults from eight different faith communities in a project called Friends for Change. A Japanese Buddhist organization initiated the project, wanting to build interreligious relationships and understanding within their younger generation.

We had only the simple idea of creating a container of relationships and trust, then invited the next step to reveal itself. So we held the space in a very flexible, responsive way. We took care to include everyone deeply as equals, inviting authenticity, mixing in prayer and silence, making it clear that the facilitators were not 'leading' the results, just helping to create the space within which the young people could discover what was possible.

Typically with emergent design, once the container is formed, there is a period of chaos while diverse ideas abound but no decisions are made. The group reacts to the apparent lack of hierarchy and decisive leadership, and gradually gains a sense of its own self-responsibility. As facilitators, it takes trust and patience at this point to let things disintegrate slightly without stepping in and imposing or forcing a decision.

We had one meeting early on which required absorbing a fair amount of frustration and confusion from within the group. Eventually, two beautiful ideas for interfaith action projects emerged and were taken forward with a sense of shared ownership and deepened relationship. The ideas were definitely different from anything I would have steered the group towards, but we were better for it, more vital and alive.

A style of partnership working that doesn't work

Contrast that with a story of another interfaith project we were involved with last year. This programme was funded by a government department with an interest in improving the governance of minority faith groups and supporting them to better integrate into their local community fabric. The desired outputs were decided by the government department, who then engaged a key partner, a Muslim-led charity, who designed the programme in some depth.

They were then encouraged to locate and engage interfaith collaborators and facilitators. At that point, St Ethelburga's was invited into a diverse planning group of truly lovely people with great experience. The Muslim charity guided the process very well, under the guidance of the government department. Each partner organisation contributed its skills and expertise to what seemed like a very valuable 6-month training programme. Then we began recruiting participants.

Recruitment was difficult. Despite its apparent value, not many communities came forward to participate. It was uphill work. Eventually the project folded, generating no results at all. Reflecting on the end game, we clearly saw that a lack of life-force or enthusiasm for the project had made recruitment tough. Just as clearly, this lack of contagiousness was a result of a top-down process which aimed for a fixed output, thus missing a creative opportunity.

I'm convinced that if the same partners had come together in a way that built equal and inclusive relationships, and encouraged authenticity, developed trust, and asked "What is wanting to emerge from within the field at this time?" – the results could have been very different.

Principles of creative emergence in interfaith work

How can we engage creative emergence and how can we co-create rather than simply collaborate as we do our interfaith work?

Here are some principles our community arrived at:

- *Come together as equals and take plenty of time to build a solid container of trust, using storytelling to invite in everyone's highest aspirations and authentic selves.*
- *Consciously invite in a dimension beyond yourselves through a shared intention to do so.*
- *Welcome diverse voices, include the marginalized; engage the body and heart, not just the mind; welcome disruption and listen for its message.*
- *Be generous with time. Weave empty space, silence, reflective periods, time in nature, music, imagery, and prayer into the process.*
- *Don't be an expert. Adopt an attitude of 'not knowing,' don't over-structure, don't predefine, stay open and humble, listen deeply.*
- *Dissolve hierarchies, don't 'over-lead'. Tolerate chaos when it comes and wait patiently for the process to disintegrate and reorganise relationships and results around the unexpected.*
- *Nurture the new patterns that emerge gently. Let them breathe, try out new ideas freely but keep an open mind, and don't be too fast to pin anything down – it may disintegrate and reorganise a second or third time before becoming coherent.*
- *Share information and results freely. Honour the human dimension and community. Prioritise relationships and meaning over concrete outcomes.*
- *Let go of expectations, follow what is alive, have fun, and celebrate.*

So ... what is the real importance of co-creation and emergence? Surely it must be that it enables us to create from the new now. We are at a time in human history where we cannot afford to keep endlessly damaging life. We need a new perspective, a new paradigm, rather than recreating the same problems by thinking and acting in the same way.

Emergence takes us into new, co-creative space. **When we connect to the non-hierarchical patterns we find in nature, when we step outside our habitual human hubris and acknowledge what we don't know, and when we listen deeply to the interrelated 'field' we live in, subtle, important change can happen. It can take us beyond our fixed and limited ideas and allow a life-force into the space that can reorganise our reality in new, sustainable ways.**

Fundamentalism and barren secularism sometimes seem to trap us a world where meaning is being eroded and we are fast becoming spiritually bankrupt. The world of faith and practice needs to find ways out of the trap. And as spiritual people, **these new tools ask us to surrender into the deeper trust of 'interbeing,'** that is, supporting people to collaborate across our differences for the good of the whole. My hope for the interfaith world is that we allow ourselves to open up more deeply, be reorganised according to a greater will, and be shepherds of the new.

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