Wilding Organisations

A ramble about human growth at work

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by JonBarnes.

Mono-culture, a lack of diversity, the exploitation of precious resources... these are just some of the ways in which we're causing huge damage to not only the natural world, but to human nature in the workplace. The human instinct to interfere is the root cause of both these catastrophes.

Yet, it also points us towards the simplest of possible solutions: to get out the way. *Wilding* is the concept of letting nature regenerate without our interference and it is yielding incredible results. When we move aside, the natural world can show its resilience.

In this short essay, we consider how to apply the idea of wilding as a metaphor, to human nature. From stories of child-led education, through to the workplace, we imagine how we could adopt wilding as an alternative lens through which to look at a different way of designing organisations.

If nature can bounce back when we get out of the way, is it possible that human nature could regenerate given the freedom to do so? If the natural world is our greatest teacher, what wisdom can it teach us when it comes to our own growth?

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First published in 2020.

ISBN: 978-1-78723-448-2

About me

I'm an organisational consultant specialising in helping organisations to be more self-organising and less hierarchical. I mentor leaders and coach teams.

I also tinker with related philosophical topics including: distributed democracy, child-led education, behavioural science, developmental psychology and topics involving freedom and uncertainty.

I've been lucky to share some of these ideas in my short books, talks, online courses as well as lectures at HEC Paris Business School, The School of Life, The Hay-On-Wye Philosophy Festival and TEDx.

You can find out more by visiting my website:

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Lady: *I should've been home hours ago.*

Tramp: *Why? Because you still believe in that "ever faithful old dog trey" routine? Ah, come on, Pige. Open up your eyes.*

Lady: *Open my eyes?*

Tramp: *To what a dog's life can really be. [Let me] Show ya what I mean...*
Look down there. Tell me what you see.

[They look over a valley with a pristinely landscaped village in the foreground]

Lady: *Well, I see nice homes with yards and fences...*

Tramp: *Exactly. Life on a leash. Look again, Pige.*

[Tramp takes Lady's attention to the wilderness beyond the village]

Tramp: *Look, there's a great big hunk of world down there with no fence around it... where two dogs can find adventure and excitement... and beyond those distant*

hills... who knows what wonderful experiences. And it's all ours for the taking, Pige. It's all ours.

Lady: *It sounds wonderful.*

Tramp: *But?*

Lady: *But who'd watch over the baby?*

Tramp: *You win. Come on. I'll take ya home.*

Contents

Wild Nature

Recently, my wife (Gabs), son (Ivor, 10) and I moved house. We moved from Brighton on the south coast of England to a little village in the countryside. Our new home is just at the entrance of the South Downs National Park. We are thrilled to be living amongst the calming, rolling hills. It's perfect for walking, for cycling and even in the brief time we've been here we find ourselves noticing and commenting on the behavioural patterns of the birds, the changes in the sky, the different plants (which we know embarrassingly little about). We love being amongst nature.

The South Downs is aesthetically speaking, quintessentially English. There are sheep and cows, but not 'too many'. There is some diversity of flora and fauna, but not 'too much'. There are farms, but not too many. It feels like nature, but a very polite kind of nature. It is nature, but sculpted by laws and rules and regulations and human interference, but not too much, or at least not

visibly so. It is kind of like it is pretending to be nature. It is most definitely nature, in that everything is (including us) natural, but it is definitely not wild. Don't get me wrong, it's beautiful. My wife and I have had many long chats, sometimes clearing the air atop of a beautiful green hill. My son and nephew and I have enjoyed going camping in the Downs. But there is something about the landscape that gives me this odd sense that we're pretending to be in nature...

Just behind the South Downs National Park, just over 30mins driving time from Brighton, is a place called Knepp. It dates back to the 12th century when 'William de Braose (1144–1211), lord of the Rape of Bramber, built a motte and bailey keep, now known as Old Knepp Castle'[1]. It was then the hunting ground of kings, and by the 20th century, had become a farm. In 1987 (the year I was born weirdly) Charlie Burrell inherited Knepp Estate from his grandparents. The farm was already losing money and Charlie was keen to turn the family business into something profitable. For the following decade or so, he intensified Knepp's approach to farming by investing in improving infrastructure, by diversifying into ice-cream,

[1] Tree, Isabella. Wilding: The Return of Nature to a British Farm

yoghurt and sheep's milk but ultimately failed to make money.

By 2000, it was clear something had to change. The hard work wasn't paying off. Years of intensive farming was, well, intense. And financially, with only debt to show for it. In the end, they were forced to sell their dairy herds and farm machinery, and put some processes out to contract in order to clear their huge debts. But then, a couple of years later, something amazing started to happen. With the support of some funding to restore a section of the park, and inspired by the controversial ideas of Dutch ecologist Dr Frans Vera, and his seminal book *Grazing Ecology and Forest History*, Charlie envisioned a conservation project which was 'process-led' and non-goal-orientated. In this new project, as far as possible, they would be driven by one guiding principle: let natural processes lead the way. They would interfere as little as possible, sit on their hands, and anxiously watch nature unfold. This is an approach that is now known as 'rewilding'[2].

Waiting and watching seems somewhat counter intuitive and counter productive in today's productivity obsessed

[2] https://knepp.co.uk/background

culture. Capitalist culture tends to assume that for good things to happen, we must work hard. And that if you aren't working hard, you aren't useful. Perhaps even not of any use at all. Worthless. Not working hard is guilt inducing. And I would assume for a family steeped in farming history, this workers guilt is perhaps intensified even further. For this very reason, not working hard, is very hard work. And in the case of Knepp Estate, not working hard meant nature could finally get to work.

As they strategically stepped back from the land, all sorts of wonderful things started to happen. Things that were deemed uncouth by locals at times. In one instance, an old dying oak that would have otherwise been disposed of, was left to rot in the park. This seemed to impinge on the Victorian aesthetic sensitivities of some ramblers, who were not happy about the sight of a dying tree. The rotting oak however, it turns out, is a team player, providing nutrients for the ground, which provided super intelligent mushroom proteins with the food they needed to strengthen the surrounding ecosystem. The nutrients provided to the soil by the oak also delivered a huge gift to the innumerable types of insects. The tree also hollowed itself out to lose some weight, shedding its innards into the ground. The increasing amount of life

around the tree became a hunting ground for birds, who were attracted to the farm and spread various seeds from distant lands. The introduction of deer to the park also meant that various birds were turning up in order to eat the parasites off the deers' back. The introduction of pigs meant that our messy friends decided to plough through the areas of the fields, which apparently followed "the exact routes on the Ordnance Survey map". Charlie and his wife Isabelle then realised that what the pigs were doing "*was zeroing in on slivers of the park that had never been ploughed - margins rich in invertebrates, rhizomes and flora.*"

Then, despite the huge amount of anger amongst local residents, they decided to leave the shrubs to do their thing. It turns out that thorns, to which we give a bad rep, aren't all that bad either and also have a purpose. They gradually grabbed prime spots around important tree seeds in order to protect them from grazing animals, who were to stay focussed on keeping the rest of the park in equilibrium. And so the story continues.

Professor Sir John Lawton, author of the 2010 *Making Space for Nature* report says:

> *"Knepp Estate is one of the most exciting wildlife conservation projects in the UK, and indeed in Europe. If we can bring back nature at this scale and pace just 16 miles from Gatwick airport we can do it anywhere. I've seen it. It's truly wonderful, and it fills me with hope."*

Amongst the visible positive impacts of the rewilding project he noted that it has *"produced astonishing wildlife successes in a relatively short space of time and offers solutions for some of our most pressing problems - like soil restoration, flood mitigation, water and air purification, pollinating insects and carbon sequestration."*

This story is nothing short of poetic, and it is beautifully and scientifically captured in a book written by Isabella Tree (her actual name. Nominal-determinism?!), entitled *Wilding: The Return of Nature to a British Farm*. I read this book incredibly slowly, namely because most pages gave me pause for thought and as I read through I noticed a pattern to these thoughts. Time and time again I found myself seeing this story of nature's resilience applying metaphorically (and perhaps literally too) to human nature. I found myself thinking of experiences I'd had

visiting a progressive child-led democratic school in Costa Rica. I remembered moments I'd witnessed in children who'd been allowed to 're-wild' their own nature outside of the school system. And I found myself seeing applications to my own life, and to my work, helping organisations to change. We humans have created complicated organising systems that don't cope well with complexity (they are often complicated rather than complex). We have applied theoretical models and abstract thinking to so many aspects of life to a degree where our ideas of how we must grow, organise, live and work together are often oppressive, inefficient, ineffective and at worse unwise. As I continue working on my mission to help people create organisations that promote human autonomy, I keep finding myself starting to give the simple advice of taking structures away rather than adding new ones. Or at least, removing structures until we can observe what small organising structures might be needed.

As I continued reading Isabelle's book, I asked myself the following question:

How might we re-wild organisations so that they benefit from human nature?

If, as I've argued before, freedom helps learning for children. How might freedom help learning and work for adults? What are the opportunity costs of over organising? What aren't we seeing because of artificial and fictional systems many organisations have adopted which impinge on human nature? How might our greatest characteristics come to the fore were we to re-wild our human nature? How might we mirror nature's incredible efficiency, effectiveness and ability to collaborate, grow and sustain by rewilding organisations?

These are some of the thoughts I start to explore in the following text.

Wild Child

In September 2016, I fell in love. I met Gabs. We hit it off straight away. Our attraction was instant and our conversations were real. No small talk, or games, or superficial sparring. We quickly got to know each other deeper and faster than I have got to know anybody, ever.

Just two months, later, I fell in love a second time. This time with Gabs' son, Ivor, who had just turned 6 years old. The first few months of Gabs & I dating, we all played a lot together. Pretending to be super heroes, going swimming together, going for walks in the South Downs. By winter I'd more or less moved in. And then in March, we decided to go on to France together for a family skiing holiday, only to meet reality fresh in the face. We weren't a family. Not yet at least. On the morning of leaving for our flight, with Gabs out of the room, Ivor started punching me, screaming, *"You're not my dad. You've changed my life."* I was mortified. He was right. The holiday that followed, was a cocktail of the highs of skiing together, and lows of painful family dynamics. After these testing times, and the following months continuing to live and grow together , we decided it was time to invest in

our new, quirky little family and develop our 'family culture'. Gabs had always dreamt of travelling the world with Ivor, and she had dabbled with the idea of his education including some 'alternative' elements to it, drawn by the idea that perhaps the alternative could provide stronger emotional resilience. So we decided it was time for an adventure.

In December 2017 we set off for Central America. Gabs left her job and Ivor, 7 at the time, left his mainstream school. 3 people, 3 backpacks, all boarded a flight to Nicaragua where we backpacked for a month. Watching the world through Ivor's eyes was incredible. Everything was new to him. We hiked. Climbed waterfalls. Kayaked around an island full of wild monkeys. One day I remember watching him as he followed ants for around 3 to 4 hours.

And in January, we arrived at our new home for 5 months and Ivor's new school: Casa Sula, a child-led democratic school in the middle of the Costa Rican jungle.

When Ivor started his new school Gabs & I promised to accompany Ivor for the first couple of days and so we did. The school encouraged parents to come and stay in the

school when the kids started, but under gentle but firm instructions to not interfere and give them too much direction. On Day 1, Gabs found herself holding Ivor's hand all morning as he grasped at her, fearful of the unknown. He interacted with the activities and other children only tentatively, fearful and confused by the freedom and autonomy offered. Gabs came home upset at having seen Ivor struggle so much. The freedom this school gave him, it seemed was actually too much for him then. He was lost without direction.

On Day 2, it was my turn. We caught the bus together with all the other kids. His eyes and ears were open to everything, his curiosity switched on, but his fear visible in his tight grip on my arm. As we arrived at school, one of the guides (the role they have rather than a teacher) greeted us. She welcomed Ivor again and said *'choose your locker, and then you're free to do what you want'. 'Do what you want?!'* Ideal I thought. Amazing. As we approached the empty lockers to choose from, Ivor froze. 'Which one to choose?'. The option paralysis was visible. Like a deer looking into the headlights.

He then noticed that some children were wearing trainers, others flip flops, and others were even

barefooted. So again he asked me for direction: '*What should I wear?'*. I replied somewhat annoyingly, trying to coach him to choose for himself *'I don't know, what do you think?'*. And he pleaded: *'I don't know. Please tell me…!'* Then we joined the other children for a maths game. Some children were holding their paper landscape, others portrait and Ivor asked me: *'How should I hold my paper?'*. With the most supportive and calm voice I could muster, I said *'I don't know, what do you think?'*. And he once again pleaded: *'I don't know. Please tell me Jon…!'*

At lunchtime it was time for me to go. Me being there was holding him back. I left him to finish the remaining hours at his new school and get the bus home without me. As I left, he cried and screamed. He held onto my hand so tightly. The guide, now at his eye level, hugged him. I, leaving my hand in his grasp, just repeated *'I love you. I believe in you. I'll see you later at home.'* He eventually let go of his own accord and said: *'I love you. I'll see you later'*. I walked home for 30mins up the dirt track, in the blistering tropical heat, crying my eyes out. My little boy was so afraid. He was so hurt.

A few hours later, the school bus arrived at our front door in La Ecovilla, the nearby associated eco village we were

living in. Gabs & I waited anxiously for Ivor to come home. When he got off the bus, there was a smiling boy and all was ok. Each day for the following weeks, it was as if the smile on his face was rapidly being dialled up and up. Soon enough, he would come home having radically grown in independence and autonomy. Rather than ask us for food, he would help himself from the fridge. One morning he even got up and made coffee for us. One night he wanted to cook pasta. His tone of voice had gone from a high pitch, 'childlike' tone, to something more self-confident. Our conversations around the dinner table become more and more interesting. He started taking part in small family jobs particularly around dinner time. And then we noticed something small, but really revealing: his posture had changed. His chin was higher, his back was straight, his shoulders were back. We realised that he felt good in his skin.

This school was having nothing short of a transformational effect on our son and so for the subsequent months, we immersed ourselves in the theories and practices that Casa Sula was built on by attending parenting workshops, by having meetings with the founders, and by reading into some of the background theory that the school was built on. We noticed all sorts of

things happen, to Ivor and to others. For instance, I noticed, with some anxiety, that he was choosing to spend most of his time with the very little kids, rather than children his own age. I grew increasingly worried that perhaps he was 'regressing'. When I asked them about this though, the guides smiled at me. Younger children up to the age of roughly 6 years old learn about the world through role play and they explained that role play is a wonderful way to process things we don't understand, perhaps even trauma. Margarita, one of the founders explained to me with her beautiful spanish accent that *"Ivor is in a phase where he is doing his therapy"*. Sure enough, a few weeks later, with his therapy now completed for the time being, he chose to spend more of his time with children of his own age. I thought to myself '*I wonder how much money I would have saved on therapy in my late 20s, if I'd had that opportunity when little.'* This little person had a natural mechanism to know what he needed. He just needed the open environment for that mechanism to express itself.

Another adult fear we had was that Ivor had started confusing and forgetting certain numbers, letters and it seemed his reading, writing and maths had regressed. For parents brought up in the industrial education system

this a nightmare for our own insecurities. 'Kids need to be taught to read and write' I thought. Again, the guides explained to us: *'Numbers and letters are too abstract for young children.'* The reason it takes so much work to teach them in directive schools is because the children aren't ready. When you surround a child with language, and words, and numbers, and allow them to learn about these things through concrete experience, you will find that when the time is right, when they enter a new stage of development around the ages of 10 or 11 years old, they will figure it out for themselves. Sure enough, Ivor is 10 years old next month, and after the last three years of alternative education and home-schooling, he reads for between one and two hours everyday and loves it. He then tends to go and research more about the series he's reading. He has done this driven by his own curiosity. The same goes for maths. I recently took Ivor to a World War II museum, and there was a 'code breaking' quiz for children. To my astonishment, without any maths tuition for three years, he 'cracked the code'.

We saw other children at the Costa Rican school build tiny electric powered cars out of lolly pop sticks, another helped to carve a statue out of wood, one group spontaneously hosted a play, each week many of the

children overcame fears by jumping into the rivers from high rocks. On Monday mornings they sat in a circle and, with the help of a facilitator discussed things they'd like to improve at school. They also voted each other into positions such as who would coordinate lunch, clean areas of the space, organise the maths games. Other children's curiosity took them to the organic veggie garden. I once saw one child, spend his entire day nursing an injured bird, stroking it and feeding it water, researching what it needed. One teenager who had struggled with bullying at an old school, had apparently come home one night from Casa Sula and at dinner told his parents that being in that self-led environment had given him the epiphany that he could be 'a leader'.

One day, I saw two children aged around 10 years old start arguing. A guide calmly walked over to them, knelt to their eye level, put one hand on each child's shoulders. She then asked the first child to explain what was going on, and then repeated this to the second child, without inserting any of her own judgments. She then did the same for the second child. And so it continued for a few minutes until the intensity and drama of the argument had dissolved, and they continued playing together. Seeing this was an eye opener for me. We adults suck at

solving conflict, but perhaps that's because opportunities for conflict were removed from us when young. We wear the same uniforms in school so that children don't see each other as different. But first of all, children don't see differences the way adults do, and secondly difference is a good thing and that truth can be nurtured in the ways I just described.

Time and time again I was astonished by these children and the school, and it has deeply impacted my view on the world since. When given nurturing environments, full of love, freedom, and experiences, children grow. I noticed that even the youngest children spoke to me, an adult, as an equal. A confidence that is almost confronting, coming from a culture of 'children are to be seen not heard'.

I learned that each time we do small things for a child, rather than patiently allowing them to do it for themselves, we are stealing their autonomy. We are depriving them of an experience, of an input, that they're natural ability to learn will process. We take away opportunities for them to solidify their ability to learn to learn, a meta principle essential to human development. At Casa Sula in fact, whilst the children and guides had a

set of rules they'd come to together, they only had one rule written explicitly on the wall: 'ADULTS, DON'T INTERFERE'. This couldn't capture this concept any better. Just like with the natural example of Knepp's rewilding project, when we stop interfering, nature's intelligence can get to work. I believe this to be true for human nature too.

"But if you just let them do what they want, they'll just play computer games all day." This is something I'm regularly told by skeptical adults. It's not a fear without foundation, games are very addictive. But it's also not entirely right. If a child is allowed to be wild, that is to say they are allowed to roam freely with the requisite limiting structures, they find so much interest elsewhere. With Ivor we agreed a 1 hour screen time per day rule together (he researched online with Gabs what the recommended amount of time is for his age) and it seems to more or less work. He does ask for more, but he also asks to play football more. Recently I saw him switch the screen off and go straight to observe a spiders web for an hour or so, watching how it captures the flies in a cocoon. It's not that screens don't present a threat to a child's development, they certainly do! And by design, as I tried to demonstrate in my last book *Tech Monopolies: a short*

rant about addictive design. But as with Knepp, they didn't just let nature go from highly interfered with, to do your own thing. The system had been interfered with for too long and so was way off a state equilibrium. They gradually observed and added elements of diversity that would increase the overall resilience of the land. And so the same goes with children. Our role as adults should be to act like gardeners, to nurture the soil, to create environments within which they prosper and to add new elements that add to the overall richness of their lived experience.

The above captures only a tiny element of what I've learned as I've been exposed to children who've grown up 'wild'. They naturally train their curiosity into a super power. A kind of natural piece of machine learning software that grows more and more complex as they grow. This idea is the legacy of the great Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget and the school of psychology known as 'developmental theory' that has built on his work. Robert Kegan, a giant in the world of developmental psychology claims that *"the single most important contribution developmental theory makes to schooling is its exposure of the child's "natural*

curriculum", an active process of meaning-making which informs and constrains the child's purposes."[3]

This is perhaps what another great psychologist, Carl Rogers, one of the fathers of humanistic psychology and the 'person-centred approach', was also pointing to when he went as far as believing that, ultimately, you can't teach anybody anything. That learning happens on the side of the learner. Even if we believe we are teaching, we are only looking at things from the wrong side and giving credit to the wrong person. It doesn't matter whether we are teaching or not. It matters that they are doing the learning.

This is very different from how I, and no doubt you, were not brought up. In most countries in fact, it is illegal for a child to grow wild (home-education is illegal in many countries). Education happens at schools. The wild child I describe is a rare thing and therefore our workplaces and organisations today are almost completely filled with adults who are the product of an educational experience that deprived them of autonomy, of unbridled opportunity to pursue their creativity and passions. A system that has become obsessed by the measurable

[3] The Evolving Self, Robert Kegan, 1982

proxies that it created for learning, with grades and exams shaping kids lives as young as 7 years old. You'll hear organisations espousing the fact that the world is more uncertain and complex than ever, but the factory school system's immaculate timetable is the perfect simulation of artificial certainty and systemic stupidity. We see that the beacons of organisational progress are self-managed, democratic companies and yet we were all brought up in autocratic classrooms with the teacher at the front, and our opportunity to learn to manage ourselves taken away by being told what to wear, where to sit, what to learn, when to speak and when we're allowed to go for a pee. Entrepreneurship and innovation are the most wanted skills of today but we pay £30,000 to go to university to talk about entrepreneurship when if that £30,000 were spent on setting up a series of failing businesses, it would perhaps be the best life MBA anybody could ever get. We talk about the rise of the 'purpose economy' but there is no time in the curriculum to ask yourself 'why?'. We talk about 'loving your job', but for most of us our childhoods were stolen for us, we weren't allowed to explore all the things we loved, we had a maths exam to pass, where we learnt equations we've never used since (I still don't know when I'll need to use 'pi').

Furthermore, organisations and this kind of school system are just extensions of one another. When you're little you have grades, when you're big you have pay grades. Teachers are replaced with bosses. Headmistresses and headmasters with CEOs. Timetables with the meeting calendar. Report cards with appraisals. And so the treadmill gets longer and longer. As a child you prepare for being an adult. As an adult you prepare for being retired. When retired, you have no idea what to do and now it's time to start unlearning, but for many it feels too late.

How can we possibly expect to have any sort of sophisticated human organisational system when we mimic the most stupid systems we have. If taking a wilding approach can be so impactful in nature and in nurturing the human nature of a child, perhaps it can offer us some principles that would enable us to create organisations which benefit from the qualities that make us exceptional. There is much talk about the rise of Artificial Intelligence, but you'll hear much less about the fact we're exactly zero steps closer to Artificial Consciousness, and that is for good reason: us humans have some natural mechanisms that if nurtured are super

powers. Gardening organisations that make use of these mega-nutrients is perhaps an opportunity missed.

Perhaps it's time to rewild organisations?

Wild Organisations

The Problems with 'Change Management'

'Deworking'

We are all products of how we grew up. Since most of us were brought up in the industrial school system, we are conditioned by it's linear logic. And so, in a complex and chaotic world, our job is to rewire our logic towards systems thinking. But it's not as simple as moving from a linear understanding of the world, to a systemic one. We lack many experiences at vital moments in our childhood development to equip us with the tools to manage life and work in the 21st century.

For parents considering a move away from directive education and towards something child-led, the transition phase has many teething issues. It's hard. Going from teaching with imposed rule based structures (let's call it *'schooling'*), towards learning from

co-negotiated principles (let's call it *'unschooling'*) comes with it's own issues. This is why some have spoken about the idea of an intermediate step called *'deschooling'*. It has different meanings, but in this context, what I mean is a period where the child is left to their own devices. It's the beginning of 're-wilding'. In the words of popular alternative education podcaster and author Pam Laricchia, deschooling is *"the initial stage where you, and likely your kids, get rid of schoolish thoughts about learning and life in general. [...] Give yourselves time to adjust to the freedom of no school routines (stay up late and sleep in!); the freedom of not being told what to do every minute of the day. Everyone has lots of time now to relax and unwind, to try new things. To discover their interests and rediscover the joy of learning!"*[4]

It is sometimes advised that there be a deschooling phase during the transition to child-led learning, and recently, I've been wondering: *when helping organisations become self-managed, would a 'deworking' phase be beneficial?* I'm not saying we all drop our tools and the organisation goes under. What I'm thinking is that before inserting any new clever management systems, or before creating loads of new HR initiatives and change

[4] https://livingjoyfully.ca/deschooling/

management programmes, perhaps the most visionary thing a leader who is considering shifting the organisational dial towards self-organisation, autonomy and responsibility could possibly do, is let things just happen. Remove legacy systems and leave a period for the grass to grow again. What we don't realise is that our organisations are filled with often unnecessary fictional stories and we rarely know where we inherited them from. You see the same job titles in totally different companies for example, or similar meeting types or patterns, similar holiday leave, or appraisal systems… the list goes on. How much of this is really genuinely intentional? Often we simply copy and paste 'the way things are' to a different context. Just because things are the way they are, doesn't mean that's how they have to be.

But moving from one system to another can come with a load of challenges and fair enough. How much do you like having a new system imposed on you? I for one, HATE IT. An explicitly communicated period of time with some deleted structures, processes, stories…etc can be a wonderful phase to see human-nature do its thing.

I'm often told by management teams that I mentor that 'people just don't take initiative'. Well it's not a surprise,

we never had a chance to learn how to. And we still don't, the rules prevent us from taking initiative, and often managers can be guilty of taking all the initiative away by being attached to outcomes and wanting things a certain way. When we let things emerge, we can't begin to predict the positive events that could occur. Our over engineering of organisations is a huge opportunity cost because it prevents human nature from expressing itself, it prevents unnoticed skills and talents from emerging, it prevents interesting and valuable dynamics to rise up.

Wild doesn't mean madness

In my work helping people in workplaces to self-organise and in my adventures watching children growing up self-learning, I come across the same two very common questions: *Isn't it chaos without bosses?* Or *Children running the school?! That must be chaos!* It seems that Isabelle and Charlie at Knepp faced similar skepticism in reaction to leaving nature to re-wild and this, I think, puts a finger on an important confusion. The wild isn't chaos, the wild is complex. The wild isn't always pretty but it is clever. It has many natural systems in place to maintain some form of balance. Our interference gets in

the way of these balancing systems. For instance, certain plants that we consider weeds, like thistles and nasty spiky plants are there for the purpose of protecting certain trees that are important to the overall ecosystem. Mono-culture isn't sustainable because when we plant tonnes of palm trees and obliterate the rainforests biodiversity, we take away nature's balancing systems. Some predators seem to serve the purpose of keeping things in balance. When moving from artificial to wild, there is the problem that we have been mono-cultivating the system and it therefore lacks the balancing mechanisms to do its job. This is why re-introducing grazing animals was vital to Knepp having some form of equilibrium and not becoming a forest only.

I believe this to be true for human nature. It surprises many for instance when I explain that democratic schools tend to have quite quiet atmospheres (it was the case in Costa Rica and I've heard this from other schools too). Why is this? In my experience human nature, plus a few clever balancing mechanisms keep the atmosphere healthy. What are they? In the case of a democratic school, the children often have quiet areas and more social areas. The children follow their internal compass and use the areas according to their own human needs.

The fact that the children are free to use their bodies is also a vital component. The role of the guides (in an organisation this might be a facilitator) is to help children get their needs met. These environments have none of the pent up energy of a loud directive school playground.

So what about rewilding organisations? Well once some 'deworking' has been done, our role as leaders is to observe and slowly and softly re-insert some balancing mechanisms, ideally by allowing them to emerge from the groups needs. In organisational engineering circles like Sociocracy or Holacracy this is sometimes called having 'requisite structure'. Not too much, not too little, just what's right. So I would often advise to first delete many structures, let a period of time elapse, and then re-insert 'just enough'. Perhaps it's a Monday morning stand-up. Or a kanban board. Or a participative town-hall meeting. In the spirit of creating an organisation that mirrors natural systems a little more, I would often urge you to insert methods that come with their own self-designing feedback loop. Perhaps it's a monthly retrospective. Whatever it is, do the least possible, promote laziness in that sense, add what is needed and no more.

(Perma)Culture

About 10 years ago, my best friend and I spent a few weeks working on an organic farm in the jungles of Belize. It was beautiful, and for me, eye opening. I hadn't until then given much thought to how nature works, where my food comes from, or that there are different approaches. It was perhaps the beginning of me caring about nature, food, ethics and to some degree philosophy.

Our hosts were following an agricultural method known as *permaculture*. Today, permaculture is really increasing in popularity. For those of you who don't know about it, at the time of writing, wikipedia defines it as:

> *"Permaculture is a set of design principles centered around whole systems thinking, simulating or directly utilizing the patterns and resilient features observed in natural ecosystems. It uses these principles in a growing number of fields from regenerative agriculture, rewilding, community, and organizational design and development."* [5]

[5] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Permaculture

The 12 principles of permaculture are:

1. Observe and interact
2. Catch and store energy
3. Obtain a yield
4. Apply self-regulation and accept feedback
5. Use and value renewable resources and services
6. Produce no waste
7. Design from patterns to details
8. Integrate rather than segregate
9. Use small and slow solutions
10. Use and value diversity
11. Use edges and value the marginal
12. Creatively use and respond to change

As I go through this list, some principles immediately reminded me of the agile manifesto. A set of principles laid out by software developers that would enable them to build quality software, that served customer needs in an effective way. For instance:

"#3 Obtain a yield", reminds me of the agile principles *"Working software over comprehensive documentation"*.

"#12 Creatively use and respond to change", reminds me of the agile principle *"Responding to change over following a plan"*.

The agile principle of *"Business people and developers must work together daily throughout the project"* reminds me of "*#8 Integrate rather than segregate*."

The agile manifesto also says that *"Simplicity--the art of maximizing the amount of work not done--is essential."* which is strikingly similar to permaculture principle "*#6 Produce no waste*."

The similarities continue. So what does this mean for 'change management' and re-wilding organisations? Well, I first suggested some 'deworking', by which I mean taking out structures so that natural systems can start emerging and interacting again. Then I essentially recommended *#1 Observe and interact*. What about the other principles? How can we interpret and apply them in the world of what I call organisational activism? Let's go through the list with that in mind:

1. Observe and interact

Our desire to interfere in systems (whether it's our gardens, or children, or team members) is often made worse by the fact that we interfere without having fully observed. This is why I'm more and more often, suggesting that when a period of change is about to come, particularly with the intention of moving towards self-organisation, it is useful to first delete a bunch of rules and artefacts and second to simply observe what happens before interacting. I once spent a weekend helping on my friends farm in Portugal where I planted lemongrass in four different areas. When I next visited a few months later, some had survived and some not. So we moved the struggling ones to the area where the others were thriving. It's the same for many elements of an organisation including people. Some people will grow well in some roles, or teams, or environments and some in others, our job is to observe where people grow.

2. Catch and store energy

It is sometimes said that there are two energy crises, the sustainable energy crisis, and the energy deficit at work. The famous Gallup study tells us that only 13% of people are actively engaged at work. That means that 87% are not. In fact 27% are actively disengaged and the other 60% are indifferent (or 'disengaged'). To help leaders who

need harder metrics than whether people are happy at work, I often put this in terms of money or time. You could say that 87% of the total employee time spent at work is wasted perhaps even making things worse. You could also say that 87% of the payroll is wasted. I exaggerate to give pause for thought, but it's not too far from the truth. Now do we really think that's what those 87% want?! Really?! I have seen the same with children, I've been told that *'if you don't teach or make them learn certain subjects, how will they ever learn maths or learn to read or write?!'* My first hand experience with our son is simple: he asked to learn these things. In fact, I would dare you to try stopping him from reading *Harry Potter* novels! The same goes for us as adults. Now you might be thinking *'not everybody can do what they want for a living'*. True, but there are a couple of great ways to catch and store the energy of a team.

My friend Jack owns a marketing business. He had a colleague who was super passionate about building a software business, that was his dream. That's where his energy was. So Jack gave him the space to do that. That person put his all into that idea and ran and ran with it. Now they own two software businesses, both very

profitable. When you allow somebody to follow their energy it's amazing what can come up.

Ok, that might have been an extreme example. What can we all do? Well, I have made this key to almost any consulting work I do now. I've found time and time again that when I impose my ideas onto an organisation, they fail. And so, I will now almost always run a workshop that helps to catch and store energy. We first gather the whole team, then we ask them to all individually write down all the things they want to see changed about the organisation (bare in mind, I'm normally there facilitating because there's some stuff that people aren't happy with). Then, one by one I get everybody to share their thoughts, which we gradually cluster. It starts off very tentative. Awkward even. Sharing our dissatisfaction with all our colleagues in front of our bosses isn't comfortable. But soon some giggles enter the room when we realise that actually, we all share roughly 5-10 concerns. Then, I ask people to stand by the concern that they have most energy to change. They discuss and make a plan. I have returned to businesses over a year later, and without any formal structures or anything, lots of change has happened and teams are motoring on, and those projects are still going on from their own organic

energy. When we let people choose where to put their energy, they will often surprise us. As for the jobs nobody wants to do, I still find that asking for volunteers works. People will take responsibility to help the wider group. If you let them…

3. Obtain a yield

This principle is like the 'working software' in agile, or perhaps similar to the spirit of 'prototyping'. Basically, instead of building and building for a future thing, try to create something that is useful in itself now. Perhaps it's similar to the management cliché of looking for 'quick wins'. This is why I personally tend to operate in short cycles. Once I have stored some of people's energy, I ask them to have a useful and tangible result in the next 6 weeks. In 6 weeks time we re-evaluate and go again. Recently in a single 6 weeks cycle, a team organised a quiz night, a video games day…etc. Showing those results fast gives us the momentum we need to continue. Once this happens, not only do we learn a whole lot, but people are moving, there's momentum and often we need only watch them grow organically from there. As Newton said: *"Objects in motion, tend to stay in motion."*

4. Apply self-regulation and accept feedback

After these cycles, it's important to stop to re-evaluate and get feedback from inside and outside the group. Then we can go for another cycle. This can also be done in a 'fractal' way. Meaning that there are small elements of self-regulation and feedback each week, slightly larger ones each month and perhaps even larger ones each quarter. The purpose is to build a system which regenerates itself. Our role as gardeners of a wild organisation is to put these small but strong meta-systems in place. In some senses, we're designing how the organisation will design itself.

5. Use and value renewable resources and services

This principle of permaculture is elaborated on by the reminder that *"control over nature through excessive resource use and high technology is not only expensive, but can have a negative effect on our environment."* [6] This is all too true for management and leadership. The amount of energy used to coerce people whether through excessive man-management, controlling personalities, complicated organisational procedures and bureaucracy, is often staggering. And it's a double cost. First it costs money to spend all that time and energy controlling, but

[6] https://permaculturepriciples.com

secondly - and surely worst of all - it is a huge opportunity cost. What we can't see is all the amazing things that could happen were we to get out of the way. Nature doesn't like waste, as we'll see in the next principle, and our urge to interfere is a double waste.

6. Produce no waste

As we've seen, perhaps the most wasteful thing in organisations (and schools) is talent. I have a clear example from an old job I had in a creative agency. We had a finance manager who spent all day behind his computer with a spreadsheet up on his screen. He was clearly demotivated and could be seen rushing through his day because all he wanted was to get home to his family at the end of it. I would not have put him in the 13% actively engaged people to say the least. Worst of all, everybody knew that this man was hilarious! And he'd written a novel that he'd had published and I believe was even being translated into other languages. So how on earth that man wasn't also encouraged to contribute to the creative team's work, is a huge example of waste. He could have brought so much to himself and others had he not been restricted into a narrow role.

On this note, I have an old client that intended to run with an idea I have on this topic (I'm not sure if they went through with it). What if instead of (or as well as) having titles and roles, we also had 'tags'. Imagine a database where everybody has many tags. My tags would perhaps be *surfing, hiking, camping, education, writing, speaking, climbing, meditation…etc.* Then when projects come up, anybody can access the database and see that other people in the organisation have a passion for that. Perhaps the cleaner would end up being the biggest contributor to a particular project because in a past life they'd done something really relevant.

Waste in organisation's is a great shame and needn't be so. We are all brimming with a backstory, with ideas, with unusual quirks that are waiting to be shared with others.

7. Design from patterns to details

Often bigger organisations have become so beholden to old procedures and legacy rules that this principle is totally inverted. The number of times I've seen ideas shut down because *'we wouldn't be allowed to do that because of [insert HR or IT or Management]'*. The specific rules become the test for everything. This is an easy bias for us all to fall in as individuals. Our fitbit or Apple Watch

tracks our steps and we soon find ourselves caring about the number more than the original purpose of feeling healthy in the first place. We chase 'likes' online and forget that the original purpose was to feel connected to loved ones. We chase money when what we actually needed was a sense of self-worth. The numbers or specifics come to the front of our mind and the original purpose is lost in the background. In schools we measure with tests, and forget wellbeing, joy, creativity. As Einstein (supposedly) said: *"Not everything that can be counted counts and not everything that counts can be counted."*

This is why patterns matter so much. When we come back to the pattern we are able to shake off excess structure far easier. This is where groups co-creating a purpose or set of principles or values or whatever organisational thingy-ma-bobby is of some value. We just need to come back to them often enough. They help us question rules. We can be confronted with a rule that is blocking us and unpick the purpose of the rule and whether it is inline with our principles or not. Sure there is a rule of a maximum 20 days holiday, but perhaps somebody taking an extra few days off here and there will help them feel creative and that will offer something huge back to the

team. The detailed rule matters less than the pattern of creativity we're looking to achieve. I find this model useful for life in general. Recently I found myself trying to get work done on my laptop and being totally unproductive, I asked myself 'what am I trying to get done right now?' The answer: 'I'm working to not feel guilty'. I stopped working shortly after...

8. Integrate rather than segregate

'We're stuck in silos' would perhaps be the number one concern of any organisation I've worked with. It's understandable when we look at the diagrams we draw and then organise ourselves by. This is a pattern we see in the outdoors as well as in organisations. Fly over the UK (or almost any other country) and the land below is made up of a patchwork of borders. Each field and farm delineated by tiny lines, paths and hedges to separate them from one another. A visual representation of our tendency to choose ownership and segregation. The problem with this is that it means that each piece of patchwork lacks diversity. One part of the region might have an array of animals such as sheep, or deer. The other might have bunnies or a specific plant. But neither will benefit from the interaction between them both and like we saw in the earlier chapters, it is the interaction of both

that creates the much needed equilibrium. This is why some scandinavian countries have created 'green bridges'. Small bridges over roads which allow animals to safely travel over wider terrains so that the overall ecosystem can be more and more resilient and not lose balance.

What are your organisations 'green bridges'? Are the marketing team stuck in the marketing team? Do you run the risk of getting 'runover' if you try nipping over to work in the other team for a while? In the same way that many animals have a natural habitat and then visit others, it is useful for us to have a home team or area we work in, but only so long as there are bridges that allow us to cross over into other areas or the organisation. Then we can keep the organisation's human nature in balance.

9. Use small and slow solutions

The word 'transformation' is a real bug bear of mine. First of all, I've never witnessed it. It's a mythological creature so far as I'm concerned. Secondly, it puts the emphasis on something huge, drastic and fast, and rarely is fast sustainable. In the same way that our obsession with growth is destroying the natural world, it is also destroying our wellbeing and productivity in our organisational lives.

Luckily, in the same way that more and more farmers, gardeners and other outdoor enthusiasts around the world are choosing small and slow solutions to sustained prosperity, there are methods of doing this in an organisation too. There are many small tricks that have a long and strong impact. Whether it's a daily remote 'check-in' on a chat forum to get the pulse for the team's mental health or emotional state. Or a weekly stand-up to never lose track of one another's work. Or a monthly lunch. These tiny little rituals don't add-up, even better, they multiply. I would far prefer work in a team that does some of these small regular things, than a team that does massive retreats and loads of perks. These small habits multiply exponentially and build upon one another, creating a team that 'grows strong, rather than growing fat' (to paraphrase Patagonia's legendary founder Yvon Chouinard).

10. Use and value diversity

In a past mini-book *Tales of Cool Companies*, I have written that diversity is the second principle for resilience and as I've touched on above there is no better evidence of this than in nature. Of course there are some coarse measures of diversity like race, ethnicity, age, sexual

orientation, gender…etc. But this is just the superficial tip of the iceberg and there is a great debate to be had in this area. What in my mind is not up for debate, is that some difference is good. And diversity itself can be incredibly diverse if we start including personality types, political leanings and more.

Diversity is needed because without it, a system becomes 'chaotic'. It self-amplifies. So a left wing organisation will become more and more extremely left wing and lose the ability to integrate other valid perspectives. The same on the right. The same for any topic. Diversity creates resilience in natural systems and I think the same goes for human nature. Asking very different people into very different meetings can help the group to not miss a blind spot.

11. Use edges and value the marginal

"Don't think you are on the right track just because it's a well-beaten path" . This is the expression that helps us understand this principle of permaculture more fully. And it builds well on the previous topic of diversity. It is a tendency we have that is visible in many biases. I sometimes use the example of surfing. If you see any drone imagery of surfers you will see that they are always

clustered in a pack. This is of course because there is a wave there. But it's also because of a herding instinct where we follow the pack. In focusing our attention there, we miss out on other opportunities. As a surfer myself, when in the water, I try to remind myself to check for other waves the pack has perhaps become blind to because of the herding instinct. This same instinct happens in organisations. Our focus on competition makes us compare ourselves to others and we end up doing the same thing. Again valuing our differences is something that can't be under-rated.

One application of this principle in permaculture is that the spaces where two ecosystems meet/overlap are more diverse and therefore productive than the individual ecosystems, i.e. the areas where forests and farmland merge, have both trees, mushrooms and crops all growing together, which neither the forest or farm might individually.

I wonder if in organisations this can be applied by helping more people to be in several teams for example. These people will have the knowledge and diversity of both departments and so would be a great asset for an organisation to use and foster. Or collaboration with

different ecosystems/companies more broadly, if two different businesses collaborate on a project together, the space in which they work is akin to the 'edge' in permaculture.

12. Creatively use and respond to change

And the topic of our final principle is a nice place to wrap-up: change. I think the field of 'change management' in many ways starts from an erroneous position: the idea that it can *manage* change. Change happens. Always. Forever. The Buddhist principle behind this is 'Annicca', which in Pali means something like *"the universal law of impermanence"*. In other words, it can't be stopped. It is something to accept and learn to sit with. Managing it is a lost battle and a waste of energy. Learning to respond to it, to project ahead on a longer trajectory and then take the small, slow and windy path forward is a life-long skill to master. Organisations don't change in a linear fashion according to a paint by numbers model. We try things, they fail, we learn new things, we uncover new opportunities, we discover new implications and we try again. Repeat. Forever. A bad gardener expects everything it plants to work. Any good gardener will say *'let's plant a few here and a few here*

and see which one grows.' The same goes for rewilding our organisations.

Concluding on permaculture

I hope it's been useful to explore the different principles of permaculture as applied to building more autonomous organisations. You will have noticed some cross-over perhaps even repetition between the different principles but that is a reality that cannot be overcome, not without losing the important nuance of the real world. Organisations, just like nature, function in systems. Categorising disciplines and putting them into boxes is the very logic we must move away from to nurture the whole system. My suggestion is to print these 12 principles in your office and to occasionally go through them and see what thoughts it triggers. I think they offer a wonderful conceptual model for a healthy regenerative approach to human growth.

Hierarchies

I once had a little geeky disagreement and that I think highlights something very interesting about our misunderstanding of an important topic to reframe in

organisations: hierarchies. This disagreement was about the important topic of… ants. Yes ants.

Ants are fantastic creatures. And whilst our family had our year of rewilding ourselves in Central America, our son spent many many hours following their trails. By the end he could see there were different types of ants like leaf-cutter ants. And even that some ants have different jobs. The trails they create in wild environments are beautiful and so clear, even inspiring. I did a little research into them and discovered that ant colonies *'have no central control, nobody tells anybody what to do'* [7]. However, I had been told that ants do have hierarchies, they have a queen ant, and soldier ants, and worker ants…etc. But this misses the point. This projects a human concept on to reality. Because we have had kings and queens and soldiers, we have given these labels to ants, but it's totally different. Whilst we allow our politicians for instance to set rules, that's not how it works for ants. There's no ant parliament. There's no meeting where the queen says 'you do this, you do that'. The ants make decisions at the local and individual ant level. The idea that there is hierarchy isn't totally untrue

[7] The Emergent Genius of Ant Colonies by Deborah Gordon, TED 2003

in that there are different roles and that some roles are more numerous than others which creates some sort of economy based on scarcity. But the idea that there are boss ants and subordinate ants is a human story.

The reason I love this story is that what we often don't realise is that it applies to us too. We have created fictional stories that we live by quite strictly. There is no hierarchy in an organisation. Not a real one. I'll say that again: just like ants, there is no hierarchy in a human organisation. This is a fictional story. You may for instance think that your boss dictates your behaviour, but that first of all - leaving potentially dreadful implications aside for just one minute - that needn't be the case. You could not do it. In fact, there are many things being done that are not according to the decisions of superiors. We are often subservient to a fictional idea. This is a simplification of reality that is well illustrated by a famous story from the U.S. Army which was captured in The New York Times by Elizabeth Builler, in an article entitled *We Have Met the Enemy and He Is PowerPoint*.

Builler shares how apparently an insanely complicated slide with loads of interlinking lines between different

factors was shown at a meeting. The slide was a total mess of connections. More like spaghetti than strategy.

In a conversation, General McChrystal reportedly joked *"When we understand that slide, we'll have won the war [...] It's dangerous because it can create the illusion of understanding and the illusion of control [...] Some problems in the world are not bullet-izable."*

This obsession with simplifying and bullet-pointing complex reality is at the core of our misunderstanding of organisations and our reverence for organisational charts is perhaps the worst culprit. It is an example for me of the gulf between two complementary areas of organisational development that currently I tend to observe behaving as two different camps. On the one side we have Organisational Psychologists, on the other hand we have Organisational Engineers. The first understands human behaviour and are wizards at helping groups to create magic, but sometimes lack the necessary pragmatism. The second are the scientists who understand complex systems but, sometimes stuck in theory, can forget that organisations are not machines but groups of humans who bring all their quirks with them.

Whilst there are more very promising versions of org charts (e.g. Spotify's Scaling Agile model, or Sociocracy, or Holacracy) which constantly update so that the chart mirrors reality and provides clarity, for the purpose of this piece of writing, I would like to ask we consider planting a flag further away. Sure some 'requisite structure' is needed, but just how much?! One way to find out, can be to let that emerge from the organisation. A beautiful metaphor for this can be found in Robert Moore's beautiful book *On Trails* where he explains the interesting experiment in Japan, where "*researchers tasked a slime mold with connecting a series of oat clusters mirroring the location of the major population centers surrounding Tokyo".* What is amazing about this experiment is that in Moore's words, "*the slime mold effectively re-created the layout of the city's railway system. Linger a moment over that fact: A single-celled organism can design a railway system just as adroitly as Japan's top engineers."* [8]

Having no idea what a slime mold was, I searched for images and found these beautiful network-like patterns that look like they could take over the world. Like the black venom stuff that overtook Tobey Maguire's

[8] *Moor, Robert. On Trails: An Exploration*

spiderman. Organisms like slime molds, with these emergent properties, are incredibly intelligent but our organisational structures prevent them from emerging. This is a huge opportunity cost and waste. So, in order for human nature to express itself and to not create systems which limit us, I would like to suggest that if given a choice, we choose ever so slightly too little structure than too much. Or at least when rewilding our organisations, just like nature itself, that we consider a phase of understructure and sit back on our hands observing…

What is a weed?

Us humans can be quick to judge. This person is good, this person is bad. Very few things escape our judgement. Not even plants…

Take an amateur gardener with a beautifully kept veggie patch, with seperate raised beds for separate plants, vegetables or flowers. They will almost certainly have a system to control unwanted weeds. Get them onto the conversation of weeds and they will probably get passionate, perhaps even angry and hateful. *'Those f*&^ing weeds!'*. Weeds are the invaders. The colonisers. Or the illegal immigrants. The 'aliens'. We hate weeds. I'd never given this a second thought until I read *Why*

Buddhism Is True by Robert Wright. In his book, he describes a moment where he claims to have experienced the important buddhist insight of 'emptiness' when he was on a silent meditation retreat. He writes:

> *"Several days into my first meditation retreat, I was taking a walk in the woods when I encountered an old enemy. Its name is Plantago major, and it is commonly known as the plantain weed. Years earlier, when I lived in Washington, DC, my lawn had been afflicted by this weed, and I spent many hours battling it—most of them just pulling it out of the ground, but sometimes I got so desperate that I'd use weed killer. I like to think that I'm not the kind of person who would devote much time to loathing forms of foliage, but I have to admit that my attitude toward this plant was in some sense one of hostility. Yet now, on this meditation retreat, I was struck—for the first time ever—by the weed's beauty. Maybe I should be putting the word weed in quotes, because to see a weed as beautiful is to question whether it really should be called a weed. And that is the question I asked myself as I stood there looking at my former foe. Why was this*

> *green-leafed thing called a weed, whereas other nearby things that fit the same description weren't? I looked at those nearby things, and then at the weed, and found myself unable to answer the question. There seemed to be no objective visual criteria that distinguished weeds from non weeds."* [9]

What Wright touches on here, is that the classification of a weed is largely subjective. It is a subjective judgement rather than an objective truth. I'd never seen it like this before. But again, someamateur gardeners will tell you that weeds are bad because they destroy their crops. So fair enough. That does seem pretty bad. But again, recently, I came across this insight in *Wilding* by Isabelle Tree. Amongst other examples, she explains that at Knepp:

> *"Coppicing created an eternal cycle of regenerating scrub, benefitting numerous butterfly and invertebrate species, as well as so-called 'woodland' birds."*

And apparently:

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[9] *Wright, Robert. Why Buddhism is True: The Science and Philosophy of Meditation and Enlightenment*

> *"Even honeysuckle (which provides the nest materials for dormice, and is the favoured plant of white admiral butterflies) was, until well after the Second World War, rooted out as an undesirable weed."*

The most significant and divisive example that she lingers on most however is a 'weed' called *ragwort*. This plant is apparently potentially poisonous (although grazing animals have lived with it for tens of thousands of years, *"The plant itself warns them away with its bitter taste and a smell"*), although only in really extreme amounts, but has still led to many people local to Knepp complaining about it's invasion. However, things aren't that simple. She writes that:

> *"The moral outrage ragwort engenders in Britain is usually aimed at alien invasives like Japanese knotweed. Hostility to a plant that has been part of our environment since the last ice age is a peculiar new phenomenon. Less than two centuries ago the poet John Clare was extolling its 'shining blossoms . . . of rich sunshine'. The Isle of Man knows it as 'cushag' – its national flower.*

Yet to the rest of Britain ragwort is an evil to be expunged from the world."

Isabelle goes on to explain that ragwort should be celebrated, that it:

"...is one of the most sustaining hosts to insects we have. Seven species of beetle, twelve species of flies, one macromoth – the cinnabar, with its distinctive black-and-yellow rugby jersey caterpillars – and seven micromoths feed exclusively on common ragwort. It is a major source of nectar for at least thirty species of solitary bees, eighteen species of solitary wasps and fifty insect parasites. In all, 177 species of insects use common ragwort as a source of nectar or pollen. When most of the other flowers have died, ragwort continues on into late summer, providing a vital source of nectar."

So what is a weed? Wikipedia actually offers decent nuance by currently saying that *"A weed is a plant considered undesirable in a particular situation, "a plant in the wrong place". Examples commonly are plants unwanted in human-controlled settings, such as farm*

fields, gardens, lawns, and parks. Taxonomically, the term "weed" has no botanical significance, because a plant that is a weed in one context is not a weed when growing in a situation where it is in fact wanted" [10]

Weeds are things we have decided we don't want in that particular situation. We also tend to undervalue the potential value of a 'weed', ignorant to the fact that, like everything it seems in nature, the weed is there to help and provide some benefit to the overall system. So the saying amongst perma-culture experts goes something like: *"a weed is a plant, the use of which we haven't yet learned"*. A good reminder to postpone judgement.

So what about 'weeds' in our organisations? Invariably I see that we are too quick to point fingers. To blame others. To look at the 'under-performers' rather than the overall system, or - god forbid - ourselves.

How can we frame this differently? Well first of all, it is useful to notice our judgements. To see that we have judged some people as 'weeds'. We should of course first question that judgement. And perhaps look at ourselves for a moment. Perhaps judgement itself should be

[10] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Weed

considered a weed. Then it's worth looking at all the benefits that person can bring. The person that we think of as negative, might actually be 'playing devil's advocate'. They might create a good balance to the super optimistic 'high performer'. Diversity is important, remember. And valuing the marginal is too. Since our role is to garden with minimal intervention, I would also argue that spraying weed killer is out of the question, instead, I would argue that instead of getting rid of the weeds, perhaps there is a lack of something else. Perhaps there is an imbalance and we need to add more of a different personality type, or a new forum that creates different types of interactions. Then the question is no longer *'what do we want to get rid of?'* but rather *'what do we want more of?'*.

It is often reported that in wilder, more self-managed organisations, there is rarely any need to fire anybody, or ask anybody to leave. That people seem to leave of their own natural accord. That they feel for themselves that they just don't fit in. This to me is desirable. A system that always finds its own balance.

Concluding Thoughts

I end this little ramble about wilding organisations as I'm about to go on an actual ramble around a nearby forest in Stanmer Park. I've just dropped my son off at Forest School. He comes every Tuesday afternoon and loves it. Last week they made 'ketchup' out of Hawthorn berries and he often comes home having carved a wooden weapon of some kind. It's funny that we talk about 'going out into the wild', but for him I sense he's actually coming home. He's far more comfortable climbing trees and playing in forests than he is in the busy city. As am I. I know some who would say the opposite. It's important to treat ourselves, and meet each other, as individuals.

Which is why a one size fits all structure very rarely works. I'm more and more aware of this in my work helping organisations become more adaptive. For all the different tools I have at my disposal to help, it's funny what works in one organisation doesn't in another. Each system seems unique and really does tend to only accept it's own answers. Sometimes I find myself feeling like a fraud: *I should have all the answers. I'm the expert. I should know what to do.* I've even found myself acting

that out, approaching problems trying to look good even though the truth might be as simple as: “I don’t know, let’s give this a go”; or even better: “I don’t know. What do you think?”.

And I guess, this might actually be one of the main mindset shifts this work requires. For us to be open ended about the process, about the way forward. To avoid what in behavioural science is sometimes referred to as the ‘God Complex’, our craving to be right up front. And rather to embrace a level of humility which says ‘the system is smarter than me, my job is to nudge it to find it’s own answers’. I’m assuming the same goes for gardening. You might have a hunch that this will grow well there and that will grow well here, but ultimately you don’t know until you get the results. I’m increasingly finding that this work is just like that. I may have tonnes of tools in my toolbelt and ideas stored in my mind, but whether something that worked in Context A will work in Context B? I don’t know.

And so I find myself having to straddle these two different modes. On the one hand, playing the role of ‘an expert’ somebody with knowledge, tools, experience, practices, opinions, things to say and teach. Doing mode. And on

the other hand, being a coach, somebody with questions, double the number of ears as mouths, curiosity, humility and patience. Being mode. I personally find the dance between these two modes very tricky. Sometimes flipping between them and other times blending them both. Success seems to often reside more in the way in which I show up, even over the things I know (or think I know).

In our work helping organisations be more adaptive, there is a constant risk of irony. Autocratically declaring democracy. *Telling* managers to *ask* more coaching questions. Designing smart organisational charts that people won't be limited to. Making our way of 'being' another item on the 'To Do list' (which I'm wondering if I should scrap in favour of a 'To Be list'). And so I'm wondering if a wise entry point into the job of helping a system change, is to change metaphors, towards something that really acknowledges complexity, messiness, sometimes even ugliness. I for one, can't currently think of anything better suited to this than the wild. And as I regularly remind myself to inject a healthy dose of meaning into my work, to propel me forward for months to come, the idea of helping each person's individual wildness to emerge feels not only like a huge

opportunity for organisations to thrive, but for people to get to be more them.

Perhaps this is what Tramp was asking Lady to do in the opening quote of this essay. To look beyond the fences, beyond life on a leash. To look again. "*there's a great big hunk of world down there with no fence around it… where two dogs can find adventure and excitement… and beyond those distant hills… who knows what wonderful experiences. And it's all ours for the taking…*"

Right.

Off for a ramble in the forest.

Take care.
Jon

~

For more information, visit jonbarnes.me

5 Wild Practices

Meeting break

Pause all meetings for two weeks. After two weeks. Ask the team what they missed and re-insert only what brings value and no more.

Delete policies

As with meetings, we're over burdened with rules. Switch them off in your team for a short period and see what happens. Think this is too dangerous? Ask yourself: "What rule, if deleted for this short time would sink the ship?". Ok, you keep that one.

Make everything voluntary

This is my favourite of favourites. Make everything voluntary. Make meetings voluntary (you don't have to go). Make actions voluntary (take the ones you want). Make roles voluntary. Try this for a few weeks and then reassess. I tend to work mostly like this and have never been disappointed. It's amazing the amount of initiative that turns up. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I know somebody in an organisation I support who volunteered

to join a different team and learn their job. Amazing what emerges when we get to choose.

Jargon buster

Nonsense language (of which I'm sure I've used plenty here) tends to constrain our thinking. I find that reducing new practices and concepts to the most basic language as possible allows more room for the group to make it their own and change it to fit them.

No teams, projects only

We get lost in 'which team we're in', when really the job is to do the job. To make stuff, to fulfill customer needs, to move towards our purpose. So press pause on functional teams and departments and simply ask: 1. What needs to get done? ; 2. What roles are needed to do it? ; 3. Who wants to take on those roles? Basically we're asking ourselves, what is the important work that needs doing and by who?

Thanks

Although this text was more of a stream of consciousness than a rigorous essay. More philosophical than practical and more creative than academic. I probably wouldn't have published it if it weren't for some very clever friends being kind hearted in their comments. So thanks to them because I wouldn't have clicked print otherwise. They are: Gabrielle Minkley-Barnes, Nathan Snyder, Mark Eddleston, Rachel Hunter, Rob Nash, Koen Thewissen, George Clipp, Anya Lux, George King. I must protect them however by saying, they are not responsible for any shortfalls!