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Cover illustration: The sculpture is William Turnbull's 'Gate' at SNGMA2, Edinburgh. Photo by Alison Piasecka.

Self-Organisation, Open Source Learning and Participatory Leadership in Crisis

Reflections of a Sacred Outsider

Steve Ryman

The volunteer response to the 2015 'refugee crisis' in the Balkans has provided an opportunity to examine the process of self-organisation amid the struggles between chaos and control - the 'Chaordic Path'. This article describes the experience of one such volunteer in his effort to practice participatory processes and some to the questions that it provoked.

Introduction

Living without a home base and possessing little more than I can carry on my back, I have been traveling the world for the past three and a half years. This journey has been in response to life's invitations to be in support of self-organisation, open source learning and participatory leadership. Along the way, I have been described as a 'Sacred Outsider', one who witnesses and holds a group, organisation or community in its awakening and transformation. In 2015, my journey took me to the Balkans, where I was involved as a volunteer with people seeking refuge and asylum in Europe (and where I came to dislike and resist the depersonalising term "refugee").

One of the practices that sustains me in learning is to recognise my expectations, especially when they do not align with reality, and then to inquire into the tension. My experience in the Balkans provided a first-hand and real life opportunity to observe self- organisation at work, and to test some of my assumptions and expectations. In this article, I describe two of the assumptions that I hold, based upon my work in participatory leadership and self-organising, and I compare them with what I experienced in Presevo, Serbia, during October and December 2015. I then pose some questions I am holding about why things did not materialise as I had expected. In all of this, I am speaking from my own (quite limited) experiences, and from anecdotes of other volunteers working on the migration route. At this point, I do not claim to have clarity or to offer answers; rather I would like to propose questions for further consideration.

Two assumptions

The history of Occupy movements, The Arab Spring, Syriza/Podemos and other self-organising movements can be seen as one of continually amplifying waves. Each emergence seems to build on the shoulders of the previous movements, starting at a higher level of skill and capacity, learning from prior experiences, and further advancing the practices of self- organisation and self-governance.

Personally, I have experienced this emergence in the work of the Art of Hosting Conversations that Matter, where the level of intimacy and trust in each training/gathering, wherever it is happening in the world, seems to be built upon the foundation of all past events, whether or not the same individuals were present. The pattern I am describing is based upon my own observation and conversations, though the work of Rupert Sheldrake (2009) on morphogenetic fields seems to provide some empirical or scientific support.

Assumption 1

When I realised that the initial response to the migration seemed to fit this same pattern of emergent, volunteer efforts, I made the assumption that our *self-organising would benefit from all of the efforts that had gone on before* and that we would contribute to the future of this pattern. Not so!

Dee Hock (2005) identified the Chaordic Path as the natural tendency of order to emerge from chaos in living systems. This pattern can be seen from the big bang to the evolution of life on Earth to the maturation of an old growth forest. It can also be observed in living systems such as communities and organisations. Control is a human-imposed set of constraints intended to create or preserve order. Since order emerges naturally from chaos in response to the needs of a living system, control is unnecessary and actually suppresses the creativity arising from chaos. The Chaordic Path is that sweet spot of emergence between chaos and order and the domain where self- organisation happens. A more in-depth explanation of The Chaordic Path can be found here.
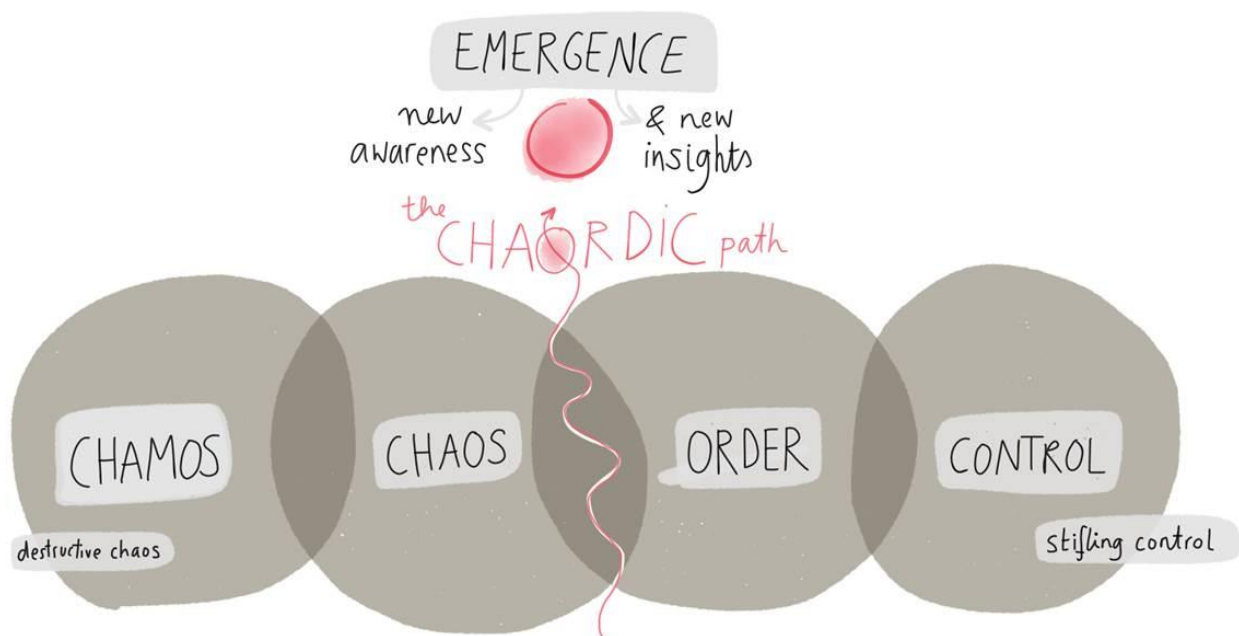
Graphic by Lara Listens

Assumption 2

Having experienced the emergence of order from chaos in many various settings, and having come to recognise control as counter-productive to effective collaboration, I naively assumed that a coordinated volunteer system would emerge in Presevo. Silly me!

A volunteer's story of initial confusion and chaos

Upon my initial arrival late at night in Southern Serbia, I was immediately immersed in conflict between another recently arrived volunteer and a group of local community members and local NGO representatives who together had been struggling for weeks to deal with the intensifying crisis. Strong emotions were apparent but I could not understand what the disagreement was all about. Being new and fresh and (overly?) confident in my skills as a host of conversations, I suggested that we take ten minutes to slow down and introduce ourselves using a talking piece and some simple processes from the Circle Way.

What followed astounded me. Part way around the circle, one person walked out, stating that he had more important things to do. Another volunteer took the talking piece and would not relinquish it until she had taken nearly the entire ten minutes to tell about each of her wonderful accomplishments all along the migration route. In the end, what emerged from the conversation was a recognition of the local context in which any actions taken by volunteers could have significant repercussions in a very old conflict between the Albanian minority community and Serbian government officials. This issue would resurface in various disguises throughout my time in the area. While I am sure that I never fully comprehended all the ramifications, I came to understand and appreciate that our actions as volunteers could affect the lives of local citizens long after we had left their community.

An agreement to disagree and to disassociate this volunteer effort from the local community groups was as close as we came to a resolution that night and my sense was that the process was ineffective in helping the parties to really listen to each other. My experience in that first circle also provided a hint that my first assumption about the readiness for good conversation was not well grounded.

Things changed very fast in those early days. On the first night, two of us had the newly-opened volunteer house to ourselves, and we spent the next day preparing it to welcome other volunteers into a supportive home-like space. By the end of the first week, we had over twenty people sleeping in shifts in the half dozen

beds and overwhelming the tiny kitchen with shared food and mess. Every bit of the house had been transformed into a command centre and warehouse for items to be distributed.

The chaos of the volunteer house was mirrored on the street outside the door. The press of people queuing in the main street waiting to be admitted to 'the camp' for processing grew as the inflow continued relentlessly, and the understaffed processing centre moved with bureaucratic slowness.

More and more 'Mafia taxi drivers' appeared from all over Serbia and spread misinformation in their attempt to profit from the desperate new arrivals. The processing center and the queue were controlled by Serbian police. Mostly the police had inadequate training and an inability to communicate with the refugees or the volunteers. Yet they were well able to turn a blind eye to exploitative taxi drivers.

A few NGOs were operating inside the camp, and many others were 'assessing the situation' - i.e. driving around in big SUVs and taking a lot of photographs - but providing no services. There were doctors from MSF (Doctors without Borders) and the German NGO Humedica, who provided important services during the limited hours they were present. But at night the processing centre quit operating, while the refugees continued arriving and there was no one other than police and volunteers to supervise and care for thousands of people stranded in the queue.

The key role of volunteers

In my first week, volunteers provided virtually all the services to the thousands of people in the queue. Volunteers set up an information point to provide factual information (where they were threatened and intimidated by taxi drivers). Volunteers organised a food and chai tent and distributed food and clothing to those waiting in the queue for sometimes 24 hours or longer. Volunteers set up tents to shelter exhausted and soaked women and children. Volunteers identified the EVRs - the 'extremely vulnerable refugees' - and notified the UNHCR staff (when there were any on shift) or tried, usually unsuccessfully, to negotiate with the Serbian police to move them out of the queue and directly into the processing centre.

Command and control in the camp

Life inside the camp was the epitome of command and control. Nothing happened without approval of the commandant, who never agreed to communicate with the volunteers who were holding things together outside the camp. Things were intended to work like clockwork inside the camp, though often it seemed like the clock was working in slow motion. NGOs, including UN agencies, fulfilled defined roles within the camp and seemed to utilise protocols and regulations to reduce or eliminate any experience of uncertainty or the unexpected. Employees worked their shifts and followed their rules inside the camp and, with the notable exception of UNHCR staff, avoided venturing outside. Within the camp, it seemed that the system colluded in maintaining the illusion that the commandant was in control and that the system was doing what it was intended to.

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Chaos outside the camp

Meanwhile, outside the camp it was chaos. Volunteers had arrived from all over Europe and beyond. Most came with abundant activist energy and passion, intent upon doing what they sensed needed to be done. Many were self-avowed anarchists, many advertising this with their anti-authoritarian slogans emblazoned on their yellow vests. At times we had trucks distributing oversized bags of food to refugees, who were immediately given another portion of food from a different volunteer group while a third group was trying to provide them with chai, all immediately before they entered the camp where a hot food station awaited them.

Sometimes, and in some places, like the fun and sociable chai tent, there were more than enough volunteers, while at other times and places there would be no one available. The 'Info Point' was constantly in danger of being destroyed by angry taxi drivers if left alone and volunteers could be stranded there for 12 to 18 hours at times with no one willing to relieve them.

Given the tenuous relationships with UNHCR and the police, a protocol was established for identifying and expediting extremely vulnerable refugees. Under this protocol, identified volunteers liaised with specified UNHCR staff who would negotiate with the police. However, some well-meaning and concerned volunteers, unfamiliar with the protocol, would independently identify refugees and unilaterally advocate with the police, often undermining whatever goodwill had been established by the protocol.

It was not long before no one knew how many volunteers were operating in the area, what services they were providing and who might be sleeping in what you thought was your bed. The volunteer house was totally trashed, supplies were cached everywhere and no one seemed to know where to find them in a crisis. The local organisation sponsoring the volunteers was feeling unable to comply with police requirements that they register all volunteers, especially since some of the more anarchical ones refused to comply with any requirements.

My belief in the emergence of order out of chaos was sorely tested

As a somewhat naive practitioner of participatory leadership and a firm believer in the natural emergence of order out of chaos, I felt a strong need for communication, coordination and cooperation among the volunteers and advocated for a daily meeting of volunteers. Another volunteer and I had called for a meeting of the NGOs and we were gratified by their participation and the willingness of everyone present to share what they were doing and able to provide. This inter-agency group agreed to meet daily and from the first meeting we experienced the tangible result of having all the medical organisations agree to coordinated shifts to allow 24-hour coverage (within a short-time, this also led to co-locating services in a queue-side medical clinic). Based on this experience, we were hopeful of a similar volunteer meeting in which reports from the inter-agency meeting could be shared and volunteer activities coordinated.

These volunteer meetings were very discouraging. First, many of the more adamant anarchists refused to participate in anything remotely resembling authority, accountability or limits upon their autonomy. Other more flexible anarchists attended intermittently but opposed having anyone regularly facilitate the meetings. Thus, there was a different style of facilitation and different structure (loosely defined) at each meeting. Either because no one was willing or able to coordinate project-oriented meetings outside the big daily meeting, or because no one was willing to participate in such a meeting organised by someone else, every issue had to be discussed and decided in the large meeting, inevitably leading to interminable and frustrating meetings.

Frustration was high due to the stressful work being done, the chaotic living situation and the lack of coordination and communication among volunteers. On top of this, many volunteers stayed only a few days and often left suddenly without clearly communicating what they had been doing and what they expected to continue, and without finding someone else to assume responsibility for it.

I kept waiting for the order to emerge from this chaos and continued to practice the methods that I had found useful elsewhere. This didn't seem to happen, and instead - to the consternation of this anti-authoritarian - I found more and more traditional leadership roles and responsibilities were being projected upon me, along with the inevitable resistance to authority. NGOs and other representatives of the control sector saw me as the leader of the volunteers and expected me to be accountable for volunteers' actions, while the volunteer system seemed to actively resist any and all attempts at the simplest coordinated communication. "What are the minimal requisite structure and agreements that would support effective and coordinated action?" I kept asking. And the answer I kept getting was more turnover in volunteers and more resistance and the proliferation of uncoordinated projects.

After 23 consecutive days of working 10 to 20 hours per day, surviving a life-threatening flood and attempting to walk the chaordic path to co-create an emergent, functional volunteer system, I left totally exhausted and discouraged. During my days away I reflected on my personal attachment to an emergent volunteer system and on how ineffective my approach seemed to have been in that setting (as well as recognising the appreciation and regard that many people expressed).

On a personal level, I made the decision to return after a few days rest to see how the system had adjusted to my absence, and to re-focus my energy and attention on being present for the refugees and serving their needs - which had been my initial purpose anyway. What I discovered upon my return was a new cast of players engaged in the same dynamics. I also found that my new level of witnessing and serving the refugees was demanding in itself, and far more rewarding than my battles to hold space for a system to emerge, where the players seemed resistant to such emergence.

Overall, my experiences in these two tours and a subsequent return to Serbia, along with my extensive witnessing of experiences all along the migration route, have led me to conclude that neither of my assumptions about self-organisation was confirmed in this setting. The previous experiences in self-organisation from Occupy, Arab Spring and elsewhere did not seem to provide a starting place for effective participatory practices, and there was very little emergent order within the official system, characterised by control, or the volunteer system, characterised by chaos. In the final section, I will explore some of the questions raised by these observations.

Some reflections on Open Source practice prompted by my Serbian experience

Can self-organisation work in an emergency or disaster situation?

The demand for rapid response, quick decision-making and efficient deployment of resources may justify more centralised decision making and accountability. This need not mean the wholesale implementation of a hierarchical, top-down system, as it might be possible for self-organising teams to appoint members to such roles, or to apply a practice such as holacracy, which combines hierarchy (of scope, not domination!) with self- organisation. From my observations, the track record of the NGOs does not support the contention that traditional command-and-control structures are effective in such a setting. NGOs were very slow to mobilise, necessitating an initial self-organising response to the crisis at the outset. Also, the NGO systems often seemed to be overwhelmed and ineffective in meeting the challenges of resource deployment and management in such volatile circumstances.

What can a lone practitioner do without a local field and a local call?

Within the Art of Hosting community, we avoid absolutes and rules, but we do have one very strong admonition: 'Don't work alone! I know this lesson well, and yet I find myself confronted with it repeatedly as I answer the call to engage on the frontiers where I don't have the presence of my 'mates'.

In Serbia, I was joined for a few days by Joost, a friend and fellow practitioner of hosting, and I was amazed by the difference this made. Joost's presence created a spaciousness within me, allowing me to relax a bit and to lean into the flow of what wanted to happen. Curiously, Joost was not the only person whom I felt connection and support in Presevo. I had other friends from the past as well as new friends I had met there - people that I care for deeply and whose care I felt. Yet there is something powerful about working with someone who shares a worldview and a set of practices, requiring no explaining or justifying, and with whom it therefore feels safer to step vulnerably into the unknown.

When Joost left, I felt myself constrict and my capacity shrink. Yet I also knew that I was not alone in the work; I was constantly supported, at a distance, by a network of friends and colleagues, and I could feel their tangible involvement in my work. But this is not the same as having another pair of eyes and ears present, and the confidence from having another person in the room who is tuned into the energy and capable of holding what I could not.

So, recognising that this work cannot be done alone, I am left wondering what to do when I find myself alone in situations of chaos, intense emotion, excess control, or other symptoms of a system in need of transformation? How do I stay open to my heart and really allow myself to feel the pain in such a situation without attempting to 'fix' it? Is it possible to be a practitioner of participatory processes part-time and to shut off my yearning for collaboration where it is not supported or wanted? Am I called to turn down invitations to work alone, no matter how compelling the need?

What contributions can a practitioner make in a system polarised between chaos and control?

My initial response is to be present as a witness, feeling the tension within a system and giving voice to the tension without attachment to any outcome. And this brings up old questions and doubts of whether this is enough. Is it enough to show up with an open heart and open mind, trusting that change will happen naturally without my having to 'do' anything?

What minimal practices are necessary for practitioners in self-organisation?

The intensity and demands of this work seem to be constantly increasing and calling for a deeper and more potent response. As they do, I realise once again that it demands preparation, just as a physical challenge requires training. It calls for presence, authenticity and vulnerability and will inevitably (and sometimes painfully) make me aware when my capacity is insufficient for the demands of the situation. And this, in turn, reminds me of the importance of practicing self-compassion and patience with the process of ongoing learning.

What level of maturity and consciousness is necessary for self-organisation to thrive?

In this situation, I was continually confronted with people who relied on power and control and others who angrily rejected anything resembling authority. Both these kinds of people triggered reactions in me and called forth my judgements about the importance of consciousness and maturity - judgements that allowed me to unconsciously feel self-righteous or developmentally superior. I still don't know how to effectively work with such people, but now, from the distance of a few thousand kilometres, I can see that neither those judgements nor that question serve me or the work that I am called to do. So I am left with a deeper question: How do I learn to open my heart to those who feel so different from me? How do I welcome them as my precious teachers? How do I allow myself to be transformed by this situation, instead of focusing on how to transform it?

Epilogue

As I write this, it has been nearly two months since I left the Balkans. Daily I read reports of the changes happening along the migration route. It seems that, for now at least, the forces of control are winning. Borders are being closed, camps are professionalized, volunteers have become redundant and their work is being criminalised. Self-organising efforts have been marginalised once again, but I wonder what has been learned and what seeds have been sown for future harvests.

In a penultimate draft of this article, I was initially a bit surprised by the penultimate sentence that one of the editors added. He had suggested including: 'What chance does Open Source practice have in such extreme conditions? Discuss.'

This sounds far more pessimistic than I feel. Actually, I do not choose to be pessimistic despite the experiences. To me, it is an act of courage and love to resist the temptation to despair while witnessing the realities of our world, to remain open hearted and engaged.

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About Steve

For the past three and a half years, **Steve Ryman's** life journey has taken the form of a literal global journey as a nomad without a home base, going where life has called him in service of meaningful conversations and personal and collective transformation. He has about 40 years' experience working in a learning organization providing healthcare in rural Oregon where he gained practical experience in working with self-organization and participatory processes. He is a steward of the Art of Hosting Conversations that Matter, an Ontological Coach and a practitioner of meditation, Aikido, gift economy and pilgrimage.

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