

Reflections on the Business of Healthcare

By Steve Ryman

Itineris Coaching and Consulting

www.itineriscoaching.com

The Machine

The Machine endangers all we have made.

We allow it to rule instead of obey.

*To build the house, cut the stone sharp and fast:
the carver's hand takes too long to feel its way.*

*The Machine never hesitates or we might escape
and its factories subside into silence.*

It thinks it's alive and does everything better.

With equal resolve it creates and destroys.

*But life holds mystery for us yet. In a hundred places
we can still sense the source: a play of pure powers
that -- when you feel it -- brings you to your knees.*

*There are yet words that come near to the unsayable,
and, from the crumbling stones, a new music
to make a sacred dwelling in a place we cannot own.*

~ Rainer Rilke

For thirty-five years I worked to develop the [Center for Human Development](#) (CHD), a healthcare organization, shaping and being shaped by this system. *Leadership and the New Science*, Meg's first book, showed up in our consciousness in the early 1990s just as we were responding to one of those cyclical economic downturns that devastate Oregon's economy and human service systems. In retrospect, I can now see that the ideas from that book became part of the DNA for an amazing organizational journey of transformation. At that time we made the decision to preserve services by cutting administrative expenses and we did that by eliminating managers and supervisors and creating self-organizing and self-managing work teams. It was amazing to experience the creativity and innovation (and the challenges) that this released within the organization.

Fifteen years later, having evolved from a department of county government to a nonprofit company, having survived more economic hard-times and having implemented some amazingly cutting-edge services, the organization took the next step in participatory leadership and replaced our retiring CEO with a shared executive, a leadership team and the organizational evolution continued. About the same time that we moved to our shared leadership model, I discovered the Art of Hosting and Berkana Institute and it was like the experience of discovering long lost family. Here was a language and models for the work that we had been doing intuitively for years and here were mates who could understand

and appreciate what we were doing. As described in the [Berkana Change Model](#), this process of naming what we had been doing and discovering language and models to express our organizational DNA amplified the evolutionary energy within the organization.

In 2008 we hosted a three-day Art of Hosting within the organization in which over fifty of our seventy-five staff took a deeper dive together. This process challenged the happy story that I describe above. It exposed ways in which our organizational culture of openness and empowerment was becoming a nice ideal which did not match reality. Oh, the organizational story was true. CHD was an exceptional organization with much to be proud of. But it was also true that we had adopted much of the fear and contentiousness and competitiveness that are endemic in the healthcare “industry”. We had succumbed to the pressures to think of ourselves as a business, to emphasize productivity and accountability and cost-effectiveness and to emphasize the bottom-line, often at the cost of relationships. When we looked in the mirror, we saw far more “us and them” and blaming of one another than we wanted to admit.

My most powerful memory of that Art of Hosting was sitting in a circle of about twenty people and crying together as we expressed the pain of our work. As an organization, we had never allowed ourselves to connect at such a heart space and when we did, the emotions poured out. We grieved the pain of our clients and the pain of having to say “no” and turn away people in need. We acknowledged the sense of being unappreciated by the community and the tax payers and legislators who repeatedly told us to do more with less. We expressed the hurt that we caused each other by allowing the demands of an uncaring economic system to cause us to see each other as problems and not as people. In that circle, we saw each other once again as the caring and committed and hurting people that we all were. The tears had amazing healing power.

Following the Art of Hosting some things changed. New communities of practice formed at CHD. Circle processes were implemented in team meetings. We continued to explore how we could re-invigorate our values and how we could continue to see each other as people and not as roles or problems. I wish I could give this story a happy ending, but from my perspective, we were not able to sustain the energy and the visions from our time together in the Art of Hosting. While some changes persisted, in many areas we slowly reverted to old patterns of communication and behavior. I can see in myself how I reverted to old ways of thinking and acting, how I allowed the pressures of the business – fear of noncompliance, the need to be more productive, demands of accountability – to cause me to give up my humanity and become part of the machine.

A year and a half ago I realized that it was time for me to leave CHD and the day-to-day work of healthcare. As I look back, I am incredibly proud of much that we accomplished. And at the same time, I feel a lot of sadness for our inability to sustain the energy to continue growing in our ability to live our values and to evolve as a conscious organization. As I gain more perspective with time and distance, I am better able to see how our experiences at CHD are not unique; they are a microcosm of the broken system that we call healthcare. Despite the commitment and continuing efforts of so many caring people, systems of caring and of healing have become a machine and this machine is killing the spirit of those who work in it. And yet there is the healing power of communication and relationships that CHD

experienced this during our Art of Hosting. And we also discovered its fragility and impermanence - that its sustainability requires constant attention. How can we support communities of practice and individual and shared practices which will sustain life-supporting energy within a system which is increasingly mechanistic? We know that the answers are found when we connect with each other in conversation and the Art of Hosting provides a powerful container for doing this. So, I am confident and hopeful that we will come together to transform the business of healthcare into healthy systems of caring and caring systems of health.

November 2011