

Jim Ewing



# Braving Uncertainty

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*We have to trust the invisible gauges we carry within. We have to realise that a creative being lives within ourselves, whether we like it or not, and that we must get out of its way, for it will give us no peace until we do.*

From *Centering* by Mary Caroline Richards

For thirty years and more I have spent my professional life with people living at the learning edge. Individuals, teams, groups, companies, organisations.

They are moved to this point, to the threshold of change, loss and possibility, by any number of things: by circumstance, by events, by upheaval, by the inevitable surprises and transitions that are part of life. Or they are feeling the call and the stirring of their 'creative being' demanding attention, as M.C. Richards puts it, and can ignore it no longer.

I have developed a practice for supporting people in this place to brave the uncertainty of transition and change, to help them let go of what is past and no longer serving their purpose and to embrace a more fulfilling future. They need to change their minds, their choices and the stories they tell themselves. With the minimum of fuss.

Over time this approach has fed a distinctive and successful consulting practice for myself and a small number of colleagues, working mostly with companies going through change and more recently with the public and social sectors dealing with increasingly 'wicked' problems.

This book is intended to share our learning with a much wider community. The early chapters reflect on the overall approach and its origins in both theory and practice. The latter part shares a family of frameworks or maps for transformative conversations that have emerged from the work.

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I hope the material here will provide just enough scaffolding to encourage you down this path. The final chapter points to other resources for follow-up and support.

## ***Origins***

I started my professional life in the 1960s as a rocket scientist at TRW, a US aerospace company, helping to design spacecraft. It was there that my boss spotted that meetings in the company seemed to go better when I was in the room. They sent me to school to develop what they saw as a talent for getting the best out of people facing change.

That was the start of a learning journey. A dozen years later I left the company, determined to pursue my curiosity about people further. Something drew me to up sticks and move a hundred miles away to California where in the 1970s I started to immerse myself in all the edgy, revolutionary therapies that time and that place had to offer – Transactional Analysis, Gestalt Therapy, Psychodrama, Voice Dialogue, you name it.

I was blessed with good teachers and willing subjects to practice on. I was passionately bidding for the knowledge and the powers to help others best navigate change, to create transformative vision, and to make flawless choices when there was never enough information.

I was searching for a conversational, casual, no-frills and no-waiting intervention to be a first responder for individuals and for groups when steep change and life redesign come calling.

I wanted to develop, as consciously as possible, a way to support others who are out on that precipice where emerging talent and vision meet uncertainty, fear and wide-open possibility. I call that the 'learning edge'.

It is a life-giving path that leads us to our learning edge. I realised over time that it is an amazing engine of growth, development and becoming. There our actions are guided not only by our rational minds but also by emergent patterns and inner stirrings, unconscious knowledge, dreams, hunches, urges, mysteries, unsettledness and nagging, enigmatic questions, slips

of the tongue, symptoms of illness and wellness, resistance, avoidance, gambits, teases, surprises.

There, if we pay attention, we can engage our latent talents clamouring to get on stage. We can renegotiate everything. We can make wiser choices, live out renewed, more compelling stories, and be more than we ever thought we could be.

### *The Learning Edge*

My work is based on engendering a creative relationship with unknowing. When we are skilled at exploring uncertain spaces and finding meaning and direction and learning there, we are better able to handle the uncertainties when the world pulls the rug from under us.

I started to see that at our learning edge, one foot anchors us in the rational light of what we believe we know. The other foot probes the dark beyond the edge, into the unknown, the unfathomable vastness of life. The creative tension between these two spaces brings our learning edge alive.

To keep our balance at this edge is like riding a bicycle. On a bike we are always in danger of falling over, pedalling forward to give enough velocity to steer the bike underneath us and keep it upright. We are balanced only when we are in motion. So it is in our lives.

In my experience, those who seem to be able to handle this uncertainty of learning, of innovation, of staying, of leaving, and all the rest, and carry on with enduring faith in realising their purposes in life, share a couple of things.

First, and absolutely required, they are clear about their strengths. They trust them. They are always in the equation. These powers will be used over and over in our lives. They are our birthright. They will be put to work in different contexts and ages and manners. They give us our fundamental life in the world.

People who are comfortable at the learning edge are always consciously aware of their strongest abilities, their powers, talents and skills. They will not sacrifice those for anyone or any situation.

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Second, they understand that beyond the edge lies the unknown. Whatever new they are experimenting with is just that, an experiment, a learning journey, a pursuit of discovery which will produce a wide set of novel conditions. Some conditions will build on, amplify, and provide contrast and depth to their core strengths. Other conditions will seem to diminish or de-energise the core and call forth other capacities so far hidden or denied.

Part of balancing at the edge involves calling on all of our faculties, our ways of knowing and being. It is a challenge, for example, to really desire something from our hearts and yet stay conscious enough actually to evaluate in a disciplined way the range of conditions which then arise and which need to be navigated in order to realise our desire. People who handle the learning edge well do both. Their hearts and bodies give clues for pushing into the mists, while their minds remain engaged, making considered choices not merely determined by the heart.

Sometimes we may wobble, or worse. Everything tells us that turning the bike or pedalling harder will bring us upright. But we did not see the patch of oil on the ground and we fall on our head. It happens. Does that bring into question our value to the world? Should we doubt our capacity to ride a bike? Should we give up trying? Should we draw back from the learning edge? Or do we learn to see more capably, to find more in every moment to notice and be aware of and to feed our purposes?

In practice we live at the learning edge all the time – even if we sometimes need to be called up short, shaken awake, to realise it. Navigating upheaval, disruption, renewal and redesign are a required course in this life. Stuff happens – and when it does our minds will be changed, along with our choices and the stories we tell ourselves of who we are and where we are headed. This is truly challenging work.

When healthy people choose to experience change as a dark, scary drama, or a pathology or sickness to be gotten over, they waste angst, time and resources, with victimhood, bad feelings and sub-optimal choices thrown into the bargain. This dark view of change is a heritage of Western culture.

My work transforms this cultural assumption and habit. For me

the inner journey to make an authentic transformation is identical with the journey of the designer, the artist and the learner.

Authentic design, innovation, learning and transition, at their core, are much the same. Something outworn or unavailable from the past is left behind, abandoned. Something valuable, also from the past, is reframed, re-imagined, and re-contexted to serve us again, in a new manner.

Uncertainty is a constant companion. Exploration, experiments, and imagining based on inklings, nudges, inspirations and passions sketch out a direction. Bets are placed, and choices taken guided by pragmatic, informed hope.

If we are fortunate, and chance does play a role in this, we can see a bit more clearly, we are at one with the world, aligned within ourselves and making some headway on our deeper purposes for being in this life.

The artist and designer can cultivate a creative relationship with unknowing in this way. We will not know the outcomes when we begin. We may not even know what we are working toward. Even the time required is not predictable, taking moments or months.

Every tool I have developed over the years leads us to this learning edge. For me, it is a discovery place I look forward to entering, where we can find meaning, direction and learning and genuinely create better choices out of uncertainty. It is an environment I find I can create with another person at virtually no cost. It is a place of high play.

At the learning edge we discover that a deep, inner wisdom about what is right for us, now, is always somewhere within us.

## ***Maps for the Journey***

I have spent a lifetime supporting people dealing with change and uncertainty at their learning edge. I listen for signals, encourage expansive transition, construct stories, tease coherence from the mess.

I noticed that over years of collaboration, study, design and practice, recurring patterns of inquiry and procedure emerged, both with individuals and in groups. I developed ways of making

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these patterns and processes accessible to others by creating a family of maps of the territory. These maps are designed to bring the many contradictory human responses triggered by change and uncertainty to the surface for examination: the forces of excitement and resistance, clarity and confusion, hope and despair which, more or less consciously, are inevitably aroused when we encounter or even contemplate the unknown.

This is the critical work, raising awareness in ourselves and others of the forces in play in the human system. But it is only part of the story of change and transformation. We must also acknowledge the context we are operating in and the situation we face, the external forces at work beyond our inner worlds, and the skills and knowledge we bring to the design of the steps we decide to take to address our predicament. The maps guide those processes too.

The core suite consists of five maps – Insight Cycle, Stucco, Implemento, Impacto and TransforMAP. Together they offer a range of ways to create pathways to clear thinking, enabling relationships and more effective action for individuals, groups, communities and organisations.

TransforMAP was one of the earliest maps I developed, a map of the territory of a changing mind, changing choices and a changing story. It helps us document where things stand so we get an idea of where we are in the process. Used dynamically for inquiry and reflection, the experience moves us along. Completing the past, mapping out possibility and the learning to be done, and framing the story of change at a human, personal level. In other words, it enables a reading of the landscape of change that embraces the sub-conscious aspects of life. It revolves around three ‘voices’ triggered by change: a voice of endings full of fear and angst, a voice of reinvention full of energy and exploration, and a voice of commitment full of discipline and intention.

Given its foundational status, I have included an appendix telling the story of how the TransforMAP was developed, including details of other reading on the sources underpinning my own learning for those who want to go deeper.



More recently, the Insight Cycle has provided the principal entry point to my work. If you take the TransformAP as offering access to the interior conversation at the learning edge, then the Insight Cycle maps the exterior manifestation, the external drivers for the internal struggle. What's happening in our head, and what's happening outside our head. The Insight Cycle offers access to assumptions and worldviews which are inside our head. But it gets there by looking at what we are acting out in the world. These maps are overlays. Start with either one and then do the other, and back again.

The other maps – Stucco, Implemento and Impacto -- all relate to and pick up on specific aspects of these main maps. Stucco explores the voice of endings, the sense of being stuck. Implemento explores the voice of reinvention, and the design of new initiatives. Impacto explores the voice of commitment, and how to engage others in our chosen endeavours.

These maps help to frame transformative conversations. They act both as guides to a conversation and places to record what is said. Together they offer a range of ways to create pathways to clear thinking, productive relationships and more effective action. They will enable anyone with a suitable conversational craft to work with others to resolve transitional problems right away, make better choices and live better stories.

In the second part of this book I introduce each map in turn, explaining and describing what they depict and how they can be used in practice. Treat those chapters as an introduction, enough to grasp the fundamentals. The maps will work straight out of the box, without need for extensive background reading. They are designed to be as simple and intuitive as possible, to draw people to the learning edge. Equally, as with any practice, additional guidance and support can be helpful. The final chapter suggests the path ahead, starting with my friends and colleagues at Executive Arts who continue to practise, codify, share and develop this work.

In any event, as the initial chapters that follow make clear, to get the best out of these maps and frameworks it helps to understand some of the thinking that lies behind them and to understand that there is a conversational craft to be learned

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as well. That craft rests on practices of open listening and fair storymaking.

These are key to the possibility of accessing and paying attention to otherwise unconscious knowledge, both in ourselves and in the universe. Each one of the maps is designed to tap into that usually hidden resource. Each has some kind of ‘trick’ or sleight of hand to encourage us to express out loud things we did not know we knew or perhaps feel too uncomfortable to acknowledge.

Successful application is not just about mastering the tools and the procedures for their use. It is the quality of our being and our being with, our presence, that will bring these maps and conversational practices to life.