



## Postcards from the Edge of Chaos: Re-Imagining Strategy Making from a Trinitarian Perspective

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### Abstract

Just as the members of the Trinity exist in the perpetual paradox of unity in diversity and diversity in unity, organizations, engaging in similar paradoxical behaviors, move toward the edge of chaos where complex systems exhibit a remarkable form of emergent order in the midst of extraordinary diversity. In this way, the participative relationship of dialogical communication evident within the Trinity offers valuable clues for formulating strategy capable of adjusting to the rapidly changing environment. Guided by strategic intent, dialogical strategy harnesses organizational diversity to promote divergent perspectives that illuminate a wider range of strategic options. Most importantly, recognizing that strategy emerges as part of this process liberates organizations from the burden of attempting to predict the unpredictable. On the contrary, utilizing a Trinitarian perspective instills confidence in the organization's ability to not only survive but thrive at the edge of chaos through the strength of strategic relationships grounded in the divine model. As a result, organizations develop greater search capability and become equipped to adapt in the face of momentous and often unexpected change.

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Strategy, the Trinity, and chaos—strange bedfellows, perhaps. Indeed, even the mere mention of the Trinity and chaos in the same breath, as Butz contended, creates anxiety within Christian circles. After all, Paul admonished the Corinthian church, in light of inappropriate outbursts during worship services, that God seeks order and abhors pandemonium. Even more to the point, the biblical account depicts God creating the universe out of nothing (*ex nihilo*) and transforming the dark chaotic void into substance. Certainly, from this vantage point, the biblical evidence suggests strategic movement toward order and purpose rather than toward inevitable decay and entropy. Likewise, God's apparent unilateral movement seemingly substantiates prevailing top-down approaches to formulating strategy as well. At the same time, the rather dismal state of most organizations as chronicled by Jim Collins begs the question as to whether current strategic methods provide the necessary means to properly evaluate, plot and achieve

strategic objectives. Yet, peering deeper into God's creative character and the process may yield startling insight into the mechanics of strategy formulation.

In this vein, complexity science offers a convenient alternative and suitable language to describe God's strategic character and activity which, in turn, serves as the basis for further articulating theoretical constructs. At the edge of chaos, systems exhibit almost miraculous qualities and behavior which foster radical innovation and adaptation, even in the most turbulent environments. Amazingly, noted pioneers of complexity research within the social sciences, Margaret Wheatley and Russ Marion, have agreed that transitioning to organizational life at the edge of chaos necessitates embracing unconventional and often paradoxical strategic techniques which stimulate emergent, bottom-up behaviors within the organization. In so doing, organizations reflect, if even unknowingly, Trinitarian qualities of intensely dialogical communication and intimately mutual cooperation. Ultimately, the intricate and harmonious relationship enjoyed within the Trinity explains the paradoxical complexity of the organizational environment and serves as the very foundation for inducing strategic behaviors as well. Within this context traditional concepts of heroic leadership and deliberate strategy begin to dissolve, leaving in their wake more substantial yet organic processes that situate organizations to successfully adapt in the face of rapidly changing conditions.

Worth noting, what follows assumes the veracity of scriptural content as a means to present the theological implications of a Trinitarian approach to strategy. Of course, this position remains open to debate, but that is left for another time and place. Rather, the primary objective herein involves instigating a productive dialogue between the social sciences and theology in order to push the boundaries of strategy and innovation theory.

### **A Biblical Bridge over Turbulent Waters**

The term uncertainty, as Devanna and Tichy eloquently noted, appropriately characterizes the tone and tenor of such a climate as described above and immediately evokes ambivalence and nervous tension within organizational boundaries. Uncertainty fuels reflexive efforts to maintain stability, even when environmental signals indicate otherwise. In response, Miller wisely counseled that attempting to maintain stability, through the imposition of increased controls, constricts information flow and dampens strategic behaviors. Historically speaking, such strategies allowed organizations to compete successfully amidst a significantly more predictable environment; however, Uhl-Bien, Marion, and McKelvey advised that the knowledge era of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has brought unprecedented complexity to organizational landscapes. As the terrain of those landscapes has become more and more rugged and the climate even more turbulent, the luster and effectiveness of conventional strategic approaches have waned dramatically. At the same time, Wheatley, as well as Pascale, lamented the fact that organizational strategists have clung even more tightly to traditional paradigms, operating under delusions of control and, therefore, unwittingly contributing to the inhibition of organizational search capability. It is little wonder, then, that the evidence provided by Collins demonstrates a multitude of organizations striving to simply survive rather than thrive amongst such unpredictability.

Perhaps surprisingly, the Christian perspective offers a potential antidote to the strategic malaise plaguing organizations. While within the social sciences Christian witness tends to work inductively backward from secular theory toward biblical proof texts, Cornelius Van Til and John Frame have argued vehemently that theological inquiry demands scholarly endeavor begin with God as the origin of truth and logic. On this point, theological reflection as to God's character and attributes may enlighten the strategic conversation. Yet, in turn, the language of complexity science assists in articulating and applying difficult theological concepts to the discipline of strategic leadership. In this way, each informs the other in a reciprocal blend of scholarly insight. For this reason, Polkinghorne optimistically speculated that a biblical approach might potentially

unite science and theology, offering an explanation as to not only *how* strategy occurs but providing reasoning as to *why* as well.

Beginning with God requires certain caution, however. As Frame duly cautioned, analogies between God's character and activity and that of humanity, especially within a Trinitarian context, often prove challenging. While the Bible clearly extols God's personal nature, approaching the divine attributes, infinitely surpassing human comprehension, dictates a degree of metaphorical license when comparing God with the creation. In short, because God lies outside of creation, any analogy with the creation will fall short of complete symmetry. On the other hand, Scott Harrower and Richard Pratt concurred that as bearers of the divine image much of mankind's fundamental constitution and behavior derives from God's. As a result, strong corollaries materialize between divine and human activity.

Fortunately, as Paul observed in his letter to the church in Rome, the creation eminently testifies to many aspects of the divine nature. That is, "since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made." In laymen's terms, the material world evidences the personality of the designer. Similarly, the Bible often speaks of God's role as the grand designer—the chief strategist, if you will. From the detailed measurements of the Tabernacle to architecting the foundations of Jerusalem to numbering the very hairs upon each individual's head, God's role as the preeminent strategist resounds within the biblical matter. In particular, the language of Revelation designates God as the beginning and the end of all that ever was is and will be, once again witnessing to the strategic dimension of God's character.

Not only that but in the redemptive aspect of history, God consummates his strategic activity. Within this context, God's plan comes to complete fruition despite the multitude of variables present. Remarkably, Anselm in his work *Cur Deus Homo* (Why the God-Man?) noted the supernaturally ingenious quality of God's strategy. Although God remains free to create at his pleasure (meaning that God is in no way bound to create as a necessity of his being or existence), creating the world in which free will exists demands a redemptive economy exactly like that depicted within the biblical account. In short, of all the potential strategies God could have designed, he, not surprisingly, formulated the most incomparable strategy possible. Given that current purposes demand brevity of theological reflection on this particular point, suffice it so say, Anselm's argument only further reinforces God's reputation as strategist par excellence.

### **Of Paradoxes: Trinitarian and Organizational**

Accordingly, delving the inner recesses of God's character brings to light the central focus of discussion—the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity, while not explicitly stated within the pages of Scripture, stands as a commonly accepted formulation within orthodox circles. Unquestionably, any discussion of God's creative or redemptive acts must, by association, include a Trinitarian context. Although current purposes preclude engaging in a protracted theological explication regarding evidence of Trinitarian structure within the creation event, Robert Neville as well as John Webster brilliantly defended the notion that the three persons of the Trinity actively and collectively participated in preparing and completing the creation of all that exists. To summarize their arguments, the Father providentially ordained creation to occur through the agency of the Son mediated by the Holy Spirit. Again, for the sake of brevity, the nuances of the specific role each member fills, while fascinating, do not concern the present discussion so much as the interaction between the three which indeed constitutes the strategic enterprise.

Primarily, the quintessential relationship of harmonious collaboration enjoyed by the members of the Trinity highlights the true nature of formulating strategy. Paradoxically, the inherent structure of the Trinity, as famously argued by Van Til, philosophically resolves the conundrum of the one and the many—the very same fundamental problem which Cafferky proposed perplexes modern organizations. Undoubtedly, determining how to humanely (or perhaps inhumanely in many cases) alleviate the tension between the individual and organization remains the foremost concern within the realm of leadership. Likewise, from a

strategic perspective, March concluded that the same dialectical tension results in questions of whether to explore versus exploit, whether to maintain flexibility over stability and whether to institute control or encourage autonomy.

Biblically speaking, Paul, in his first epistle to the Corinthian church, characterized this tension as the problem of unity in diversity and vice versa, framing the simultaneous and seemingly paradoxical presence of both as the epitome of organizational structure. As a result, the Trinity represents the archetypal structure for human relationships and organizations. It stands to reason, then, that formulating strategy, as a human enterprise, must exhibit a Trinitarian dimension as well—a matter to be explored further in due time.

First, however, attending to the connection between biblical paradox and organizational paradox requires additional probing. Truth be told, despite the obvious reality of organizational paradox, Lewis and Dehler bemoaned the apparent difficulty in providing rational explanations as to how to effectively contend with its existence. Organizations are not just complicated machines as Fredrick Taylor's once dominant organizational view postulated, but rather, as Anderson resolved in his seminal article *Complexity Theory and Organization Science*, represent complex, open systems continuously interacting with the surrounding environment, exponentially multiplying the number of contingent variables which may affect the system. Regardless of how straightforward the strategic environment surrounding an organization may appear on the surface, the relatively recent proliferation of globalization and rapidly growing dependence on knowledge-based services ensures that even the seemingly most demure climate is, as Uhl-Bien, Marion & McKelvey astutely observed, in reality, complex. Unfortunately, increased complexity disturbs the safety and comfort of equilibrium—an unsettling realization to be sure.

However, scholars studying complexity across a multitude of disciplines have uncovered a peculiar, and surprising, attribute of complex systems. As systems become increasingly complex and move further and further away from the safety of equilibrium, order emerges spontaneously. In other words, complex systems display self-organizing properties. At the same time, the order does necessitate predictability. On the contrary, in another peculiar aspect of complex systems, deterministic unpredictability imposes infinite variety within a finite set of potential outcomes. That is, complex systems follow predictable patterns in a never-ending unpredictable array of possible configurations. The most famous example of such behavior, coined by Lorenz as the "butterfly effect," stipulates that the disturbance created by the beating of a butterfly's wings will eventually create the conditions for a storm somewhere in the world. While the outcome remains certain, predicting when and where the storm will rage remains impossible. Significantly, the boundary formed which contains and, therefore, dictates the never-repeating yet ever-so-similar trajectory the system follows represents an unseen force known as an attractor. Attractors, as Wheatley and Burns suggested, provide infinite freedom of expression while simultaneously preventing the system from careening into complete and utter disorder.

Remarkably, at the furthest reaches from equilibrium, complex systems teeter on the precipice of disaster, straddling the fine line between ingenious novelty and uncoordinated nonsense. The gravitational pull exerted by the attractor space holds systems in an infinite series of nearly identical although absolutely unique orbits, allowing the system to exhibit unqualified diversity while maintaining a consistent rhythm—it is here, Pascale asserted, that organizational systems exist at the paradoxical edge of chaos.

As painful as it might be to admit, most organizations rarely traverse far from equilibrium. Rather, the human propensity to maintain psychological safety inhibits efforts to peer over the edge of chaos for fear of falling into the abyss. From a strategic perspective, organizations, grasping to preserve equilibrium at all costs, rely on conventional practices supposedly offering predictable results, but instead, as Miller contended, petrifying them where they stand. Fortunately, the biblical notion of paradox as epitomized within the Trinity may offer the necessary clues to reveal the mechanism for moving toward the edge of chaos.

## Communication at the Edge of Chaos

While paradox persistently pervades the Christian and organizational experience alike, Cafferky noted that reconciling and relieving the subsequent tension remains, in practice, a difficult obstacle to overcome. Of course, as already mentioned, all human institutions wrestle with how to achieve the vibrant indivisibility evident within complex systems. Paul's many extant letters witness to the struggles within the early church to do so—the situation has changed little in the millennia since. Strikingly, however, the relationship within the Trinity holds the key to resolving human ambivalence and frustration on this matter.

Writing on the theology of communication, Chase as well as Reid determined that the members of the Trinity exist in such intimate relationship that, literally, each naturally, effortlessly and voluntarily communicates all that he is and does simultaneously with the others without losing individual identity or being swallowed up by the whole. The theological term for this phenomenon, coherence, clearly signifies the insolubility resident within, but, conversely and paradoxically indicates that each member retains his distinct persona as well. That is, the members of the Trinity form a vibrant yet indivisible divine community of cooperation and reciprocity. Although no direct human equivalent exists, the Trinity represents a dynamic system operating at the edge of chaos and, as such, provides the prototype for all human relationships, especially in the organizational context. Indeed, such an intricately diverse and, simultaneously, intensely cohesive structure reflects the quintessential organization often sought but rarely realized.

The operative condition residing within the Trinity which allows such transparency to occur involves dialogical communication, or what De Vries cleverly referred to as “trialogical” communication. Nonetheless, the pertinent point involves recognizing what Buber defined as the “otherness of others”—a primary attribute of dialogical communication. Through dialogical communication, organizational members acknowledge and respect alternate perspectives without diminishing their own. All too often, organizational competition supersedes cooperation and coopts or coerces divergent perspectives into conformity, effectively nullifying the otherness of others. Rather, Trinitarian communication relishes the “irreducible otherness” Zscheile spoke of, harnessing unique contributions to produce, paradoxically, an effervescent whole. In this way, dialogical communication through elevating otherness, as Schein concluded, fosters the suspension of judgment, pretention, defensiveness and disbelief, leading to authentic exchanges that transcend any individual contribution and which induce the conditions necessary for innovation. Through dialogical communication, then, the organization collectively realizes strategic alternatives previously obscured, stimulating learning and driving the system away from equilibrium and ever closer to the edge of chaos.

At the same time, the unimpeded proliferation of diverse perspectives may disintegrate the organization from within. For this reason, establishing strategic intent, as Hamel and Prahalad contended, forms the basis of an attractor which galvanizes the system around a common objective, sparing the organization from hurtling toward complete disorder. Much like the unanimous agreement enjoyed within the Trinity, organizational members must concur on the fundamental purpose which the organization serves and how the organization will respond to changing environmental conditions. In this way, strategic intent governs system dynamics, holding the system in a series of never-repeating orbits. In other words, while dialogical communication generates the frenetic energy needed to push organizations toward the edge of chaos, strategic intent prevents the organization from plummeting over the precipice. Again, paradox materializes in the unification of deliberate strategic intent and emergent strategic action propelled by the diversity inherent in dialogical communication.

## Strategy as Organizational Communion

In the end, from a Trinitarian perspective, strategy represents organizational communion of sorts. Just as the members of the Trinity exist in the perpetual paradox of unity in diversity and

diversity in unity, organizations, engaging in similar paradoxical behaviors, move toward the edge of chaos where complex systems exhibit a remarkable form of emergent order in the midst of extraordinary diversity. Through the application of strategic intent coupled with dialogical communication, organizations leverage intimate and transparent relationship as a means to implement strategy and enable innovation. The mystery of paradox, latent within the structure of the Trinity, lies at the heart of such a realization.

Rather than attempting to reduce uncertainty through the institution of controls, Devanna and Tichy concluded that institutions absorb uncertainty by not only accepting but delighting in the paradox of the “boundaryless” organization. The Trinity represents such a boundaryless organization and demonstrates that formulating strategy resides not in simplistic notions of eliminating seemingly contradictory demands, but rather in acknowledging that unity and diversity might coexist paradoxically and fluidly to produce inexplicable and astonishing organizational performance, much like Goodall and Kellett contended. That is, assuming organizations are willing to risk living at the edge of chaos.

However, as the exquisitely diverse communion inherent within the Trinity attests, true risk resides in remaining in the deceptive comfort of equilibrium. While maintaining equilibrium might appear the safe bet, the ever-increasing complexity of organizational life ensures that conventional responses to novel situations will lead to decline and eventual decay. Rather, the participative relationship evident within the Trinity offers valuable clues for formulating strategy capable of adjusting to the rapidly changing environment. Guided by strategic intent, dialogical strategy harnesses organizational diversity to promote divergent perspectives that illuminate a wider range of strategic options. Most importantly, recognizing that strategy emerges as part of this process liberates organizations from the burden of attempting to predict the unpredictable. On the contrary, utilizing a Trinitarian perspective instills confidence in the organization’s ability, through the strength of relationships grounded in the divine model, to not only survive but thrive at the edge of chaos. As a result, organizations develop greater search capability and become equipped to adapt in the face of momentous and often unexpected change.

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