

« TRACKING EMERGENCE »

BY Maurice Brasher

Following David Grove, and wishing to pursue clues as to the nature of emergence, I came across this:

*"Sand turns traitor and betrays the footstep that has passed over it; water gives back to the tell-tale surface the body that has been drowned. Hate breaks its prison-secrecy in the thoughts through the doorway of the eyes... Look where we will, the **inevitable law of revelation** is one of the laws of nature..."*

Wilkie Collins, in "No Name," 1862

Introduction ...

The debate around emergence is of a particularly interesting and challenging nature because of the fact that emergence is a **process**. It is not easy to admit that there are some areas where propositional debate (where we try and establish the relative truth of competing statements, each of which has an arguable connexion with a verifiable reality) simply gets you nowhere, but it's certainly the case here - because **the nature of process is to be in movement**¹. A **process** normally requires us to live it in order to experience it. It is therefore no accident that the ideas evoked here arose from three sources connected in some way with community ("the crucible of process") and the possibilities afforded by it: exchanges between Maurice Brasher and David Grove, an Emergent Knowledge seminar created by Jennifer de Gandt in Normandy during November 2008, and the launch on 17th November, 2008, of the newly formed French Emergent Knowledge group in Paris.

The Scope of David Grove's Work: Precision and Linguistic Emergence

The issues raised here together with their provisional conclusions came to the surface in a compelling fashion during these encounters. The notes from the meetings have been developed here for sharing with the emergent community in English (there is a not quite parallel French version), and they have an experiential base in my work with conflict and conflict facilitation, notably during Processes as used in Arnold Mindell's work and during "Worldwork," an annual process work event which brings together people from around the world to participate in "Conflict and Community." My work with David on and around words, their origins, meaning and evocations, confirmed my earlier intuitions about the fundamental role of emergence, its importance, and its widespread but somewhat furtive nature. The nature of this "work" with David? My very first

words to David were "I am diluted to meet you" - I was, and I still am. Beyond the joke and the play on words, I was expressing the real possibility of being changed by my contact with David and being open to integrating "elements of David's influence," as I would put it now. This was possible because in front of me I found somebody who treated two of the vital dimensions of verbal communication with the same profound and equal attention.

David and I shared a delight in words and in the revelations which the slippages between words and between languages can reveal: the multiple faces whose perspectives are the very nature of emergence arise and become visible and audible through these gaps, coincidences, puns and double-entendres. And these gaps and personal, even idiosyncratic, connections are also revealed through Clean Language... What is striking to the linguist in CL is the relative and deliberate unimportance of grammatical structure: the connecting words (conjunctions, prepositions, etc.) are simply not retained, as a general rule. And the obligation to make sense into sentences is gone. This reflects the developmental truth that linguistic rules are one of the first instances of "structure imposed on experience without question" that human beings encounter. Being interested in the nature and content of that experience allowed David Grove to test the hypothesis: what happens when, from the outside, we allow the person to pay attention to the substance of that experience (and less to "getting the story right" (the form))? We know some of the results, and they continue to surprise and astonish by their potential revelations about the "real" structure of the client's experience.

It is not easy to be precise with elements which are so profoundly subjective: but I believe that if we explore epistemological issues around Emergence we shall be on firmer ground for respecting individual experiences and conceptions of emergence, and thus create a foundation for sharing what will have become emergent knowledge. So I shall attempt to be precise, and this involves recognising that the precision which respects subjectivity is fundamentally a different kind of precision from that connected more commonly with establishing the "truth." Ken Wilber called it not truth, but **truthfulness** (veracity: not lying to oneself). Certainly, on the part of clients and in discussion, David was "going for" this veracity. It is in fact one of the principal sources from which meaning springs (one of the other principal sources of meaning being shared context). I am able to say this because of David Grove: but my personal background (in linguistics, psychology, and education, and much later in ethnomethodology, physics, and maths) provides me with the disciplines which I am certainly using for structural interpretation (not to say deconstruction!) in the present.

David and his co-workers would pay attention to where the word comes from, its origin, history and all the acquired meanings up to the moment *just before* the present. And then he would deal with the "now" of the word, what it means to the person who is using it, including the listener. This aspect of the word is entirely under the control of the "subject" - as Humpty Dumpty said², "A word means what I want it to mean." And often in the day to day linguistic mêlée it is the only aspect we give weight to (and that is certainly what many clients are doing). The by-product of David's skill and sensitivity to the combination of these two sources was his ability to treat with due seriousness the "slippages" between registers, the different 'tones' and vocabulary used for different purposes and in different social settings. This way of proceeding allowed due respect to be paid to the original "source" from which the verbal meaning for both versions might come. When wearing my translator's hat, I am impressed by what happens when I forego "simple" translation from one language to another, and instead translate "from the space between" the languages (the result in the second language has also been known to illuminate & revise the original version).

General Presuppositions about Emergence:

- Emergence is at the heart of the processes of unfolding of life, of the world, of the universe
 - The universe is trying to know itself (maybe)
 - Emergence is characteristic of the life of humans, but not limited to them
 - You can't stop emergence: there's no going back ("no reverse gear")
 - The "opposite" of emergence could be "black holes"
 - Emergence belongs to nobody
 - Emergence is a process, and process means movement
- The only thing you can be really sure of emerging is complexity³

Some Specific Presuppositions:

- Emergence and Emergent Knowledge are different (maybe an analogous difference to that between "emerging" and "emerged")
- Emergence corresponds to the wave function in Physics and EK to the particle(s)
- We resist emergence when there are unprocessed emotions
- "Managing Emergence" requires both facilitation and a knowledge of scale/scaling
- Facilitation can modify the rate of Emergence
- Facilitating emergence is a process⁴ relatively undefined and not well understood
- David Grove was skilled at facilitating emergence so that it became

emerged knowledge: his practices give us some useful waymarks and pathways to follow.

Origins of Emergence

Where does emergence come from, where is it going - and what is it for? This is really a way of asking what the function of emergence is. At big chunk level, it seems to be part of the expanding universe. As part of the afterbirth processes of the big bang, many things (such as, for example, the inventions and refinements of digital technology) are still emerging. Emergence is probably the universe's antidote to entropy (energy death) and does seem initially to come from the inside toward the outside, but this is probably more a comment on our consciousness of it than on emergence itself. We become aware, and as a result can make more distinctions: then we say that something has emerged. In fact, it is somewhat difficult to apply the usual cause-effect laws to emergence: we cannot reliably *cause* emergence by wishing it, or even by choosing to take specific action (however, *not* taking action can also stimulate emergence: see 'Conditions which Facilitate Emergence' at the end). A result can be the outcome of several different, indeed simultaneous, causes. And once emerged, the effect becomes a cause in its own right.

Notice how the present (i.e. the effects of a present state) can often, mistakenly in my view, be ascribed *entirely* to past causes. This can be seen as an over-application of Newton's Third Law of Motion⁵. Originally formulated to explain the behaviour of objects, its generalisation to people and events highlights a complexity originally undreamed of (even with regard to objects). In fact it looks very much as if our representation of an event may profoundly affect what then can emerge: but not in any simple, linear, objective - or reliably predictable - way!!!

Emergence and "Others"

At the human level it is clear that the presence of the other person (the "witness?") plays a significant part in the process of emergence. And in terms of emergence becoming emergent knowledge, the role of the other(s) may be crucial. Since we should suspect that all that emerges is not necessarily knowledge, maybe one of the key conditions is this witnessing, this being looked upon by some 'incarnated otherness.' Once I become aware, I can very quickly become involved in the process of attempting to facilitate the same emergence in the other(s), or even trying to convince them of the existence and validity of the emerged knowledge I now possess (and which they "need," of course). However, if understanding, like knowledge, is something that emerges (because you can not "give" understanding or knowledge directly to another person, let alone a group), we would do better to concentrate on how to have it emerge...

Now, the moment it *is* noticed, that "something" becomes a candidate for the category "knowledge." It remains in the category "potential knowledge" as **information**, until it finds a place in some human being's system, where it can be integrated. We certainly do not use the expression "emerged knowledge" very often. This might lead us to conclude that all that is knowledge has already "been through" emergence, just as all human beings (so far, at any rate) have "been through" birth.

So what is the difference between Emergence and « Emergent Knowledge »?

So emergence is distinct from "knowledge": but "knowledge" can result from emergence. Indeed, we can say that knowledge is what can come out of emergence. Emergence, *qua* process, is of a different nature (Bateson would say "of a different logical type⁶") from knowledge. Emergence is of a higher order in the sense that as a concept it organises what does, in fact, emerge. It is well to note that the higher level concept of emergence is only *organisationally* superior to emergent knowledge. It is higher in the sense that it is at a greater level of abstraction, and as such manifests the necessary hierarchisation of structures which nested functions display (see the work of Ken Wilber). It is certainly true that holding the concept of emergence in one's mind and vision, not to say one's feelings, is not without effect. "Knowing" emergence (its value and function) definitely predisposes us to recognise the process at work in many more circumstances than if we did not value it and notice it. As such, emergence can certainly be seen as a gateway to increased awareness. But let us also **beware**: emerged knowledge can be very quickly superseded by new emergence, and we sometimes may want to say "Stop! This is slipping through my fingers, I can't control it... I thought it was 'mine' because I discovered it..." All real enough (who wants to be left behind by emergence?), but more emotional than epistemological, more related to survival than to awareness!

As well as being on a different level of logic, **emergence** and **emergent knowledge** can be seen as manifestations of two tendencies in physics which have largely been opposed to each other: waves and particles. The wave is permanently present, but under certain circumstances which can be defined it "breaks down" into particles. In the field of emergence, emergence may itself **be** the wave, with emergent knowledge (the instances, concepts and ideas which are differentiated) analogous to the particles. In addition, it seems likely that it is our 'observer function' which influences and facilitates the **kind** of knowledge that will emerge.

Having got this far, we may feel a growing obligation to give our attention to

whatever is emerging. After all, who would take the risk of deciding in advance whether something will become - or, indeed, not become - knowledge? That would be but a short step from *this* potentially perilous exercise, which stands as an attempt to say what emergence is, and therefore what qualifies (and what may not qualify) as emergent knowledge. Emergence is a large scale concept (it certainly applies to our universe and maybe beyond...) and the principal challenge consists in operating with it at the most helpful level relative to what we want to do with it.

Even though emergence as a phenomenon does not have humans as its source, it manifests itself throughout the natural world and therefore through human beings and their activities and ideas. It is therefore possible, in the light of the evidence we have collected, to stipulate the conditions under which emergence is likely to occur. In this context I wish to point out that in a one to one situation, emergence will not necessarily "strike" only the client: indeed, the client "needs" the facilitator's aliveness to emergence. Facilitating as an activity uses emergence as a tool, and it behoves facilitators to understand that they certainly do not entirely control it. (It is this writer's position that they **can not**). Emergence has not signed a contract to behave in a particular way: however it **does** obey certain laws and behaves in a sufficiently predictable manner for us not to be surprised when it manifests. So it is possible to say that whenever any of the following conditions is present, "Watch out for emergence!"

Conditions which facilitate Emergence (one of them can be sufficient)

- Being alive (emergence is an inevitable concomitant of biology & evolution)
- Noticing what is happening: sensorial information >>> becoming aware
- "Heating up": e.g., maintaining attention over time
- "Compression": keeping up the pressure (e.g., putting a container round the "problem")
- Maintaining your position (either physical or mental), "standing for" something long enough to (in the eyes of the surrounding environment) represent it
- Keeping things to yourself (which will make sure that « heating up » goes on)
- Conflicts bring together several of these phenomena: being involved in a conflict, whether internal or external, is a sure-fire way of ensuring emergence.

Conclusions: The process we are trying to "nail down" appears elusive for the simple reason that we do not have a clear subject: object relationship to it. And this is because we ourselves are here as a result of it: and it is "inside" us. It is this which makes it possible for us to be 'innocent of emergence': but to be ignorant of it is unhelpful and maybe dangerous⁷. So there are a number of

reasons why it behoves us to approach emergence with respect. We are the users of emergence but not the proprietors: the beneficiaries, but not the owners. The stakes are high, for when we are able to remove the veil which our lack of recognition of emergence places on our perceptions and understanding, we attain knowledge.

Copyright Maurice Brasher, January MMIX

My heartfelt thanks are expressed to Jennifer de Gandt for her blessing, and most particularly to Philip Harland, co-worker with David Grove on Emergent Knowledge and the Power of Six, for his untiring and benevolent devotion to the interests of the reader and readability: beyond that, to Penny Tompkins and James Lawley for the original clean and emergent research focus, and to the whole emergent community on both sides of the channel.



Maurice Brasher
Consultant, Coach and Teacher
pioneering Learning by Discovery and Close Observation.
Translator of books by Ken Wilber, Robert Dilts and Arnold Mindell.
Conflict Facilitator using Process Work, NLP Trainer, and
Emergent Knowledge Researcher.

¹ - unlike conceptual analysis (our habitual way of proceeding, in fact a default response), which can only be carried out with ideas once they have been immobilised and persuaded to reveal something of their real nature. Emergence cannot be bidden in this way.

² In "Alice Through the Looking-Glass" by Lewis Carroll: "When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less." He goes on, rather intriguingly: "The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things." "The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master - that's all."

³ Knowledge results from emergence, but from knowledge emerges complexity.

⁴ Really two processes: the one (facilitating) being required to mesh with the other (emergence).

⁵ "To every action there is an equal and opposite reaction"- in "Quantum Mind" by Arnold Mindell, p155, pub 2000 by Lao Tse Press.

⁶ An excellent exposition of Bateson's Logical Types can be found in Robert Dilts' book (Appendix A) « From Coach to Awakener » MetaPublications, California, 2003. Edition Française "Etre Coach", Dunod, Paris 2008.

⁷ People *can* bring transformative understanding to situations: it is part of the human birthright and not to do it is *unhelpful* to the individual and the collective. And I use the word *dangerous* advisedly, simply because we all do engage in practices which facilitate emergence. Because we are sometimes unaware of this, we can be surprised by what turns out, and may disclaim all responsibility for having stimulated its emergence.