Toward a Dream Weaver theory of Nonprofit Organizing

A Preliminary Position Paper

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Scholars of nonprofit organizations have been arguing consistently for years that nonprofit organizations are unique from other organizational forms, such as governmental and for-profit organizations (Lewis, 2005; Dixon, 2004). However, little evidence has been provided revealing how nonprofits are distinctive in how they are formed, maintained, and dissolved over time.

Over the course of time, the authors of this paper have been deeply involved in creating nonprofits and working with struggling nonprofits. Based on that work, we have developed a model of nonprofit development that answers the question: How are nonprofits distinct in the formation, maintenance, and dissolution of nonprofits.

What we propose is a model of organizational birth that privileges the role of human communication. Our model is based on the reality that nonprofit organizations are formed around peoples’ dreams and passions for what they see as a better way of being. Theories of nonprofit organizing should reflect the ways in which these dreams and passions weave people into a community of believers who will do the work of forming a nonprofit. More specifically, we argue that organizational creation in non-profit settings are predicated upon the interconnectivity of three organizational functions: Dream weavers, catalysts, and foot soldiers, all of whom act in service of an organizational dream. Here we provide a preliminary analysis of the roles of these important nonprofit actors.

**Dream Weaver**

Dreams are essentially a psychological phenomenon. However, dream weaving is an inherently communication phenomenon in which the threads of a vision are constantly
drawn and redrawn such that others come to share the dream with the weaver. A vision is created and shared such that other’s imaginations become captured by the dream. However, a dream is a fragile phenomenon. Without constant energy, constant movement, it will dissipate in the same way that a pleasant dream becomes illusive upon waking. Consequently, a dream weaver keeps weaving, keeps moving, keeps capturing the spirit of others.

Dream weavers capture others in the web of their dreams. The entrapment is voluntary, it is pleasurable, and it creates a sense of purpose. Those captivated do not want to be released from the weaving of the dream. As a result they begin to weave with the dream weaver.

Dream weavers entice others to weave with them. The Dream Weaver’s vision starts to be woven by others who help shape the dream in often reciprocal ways. The dream weaver weaves, others are inspired to dream and maybe even to weave. That secondary weaving then alters, often subtly, the dream weaver’s vision.

**Catalyst**

The catalyst is a person or event that prompts the dream weaver to move toward establishing the nonprofit as a reality. In some cases, the catalysis is a person who acts to make the dream seem possible. Sometimes the catalyst is an event. For example, hurricane Katrina was an event that catalyzed the creation of numerous nonprofits. The catalyst can also be an organized activity, such as a classroom project, or a workplace function. In any case, the catalyst inspires the weaver to attempt to dream the vision into being.
The catalyst marks a noticeable starting point or a noticeable turning point in nonprofit formation. A catalyst is powerful in shaping the dream, sometimes igniting the dream, sometimes changing its trajectory. While the problem the nonprofit will attempt to resolve may continue to exist (hunger, illness, etc), the catalyst itself is short lived. It represents a moment of grace in which a dream weaver can either move forward or not. In the words of Robert Frost, it provides a divergent path. If that path is taken, the nonprofit begins to form. If the path is not taken, the nonprofit remains unrealized. It dissolves back into the night time realm of dream. It requires action. It is not a catalyst if the road is not taken.

**Foot soldier/translator**

Dreams are often forgotten upon awakening. The foot soldier helps to keep the dream alive in the everyday realm. Here we use a military metaphor as a jarring contrast to the Dream Weaver metaphor. This person is the one who interprets the dream into the everyday necessities of creating a nonprofit. This person asks: What do I do to make this real. The foot soldier is regimentsed and systematic in a way that few Dream Weavers can be. In many ways the foot soldier is oppositional to the Dream Weaver. The Dream Weaver mystifies reality by showing what could be. The Foot Soldier demystifies the dream by pushing the dream to shape itself to reality. Dream Weavers are not constrained by the reality of government structures or funding realities. The Foot Soldier is faced with the reality that government structures and people’s expectations will shape the organization. They create structures and meanings that conform to the institutional expectations of a nonprofit in contemporary society. They complete paperwork, they start bank accounts, they complete or find someone to complete the 501c3.
Supporting cast

Obviously a nonprofit organization is not created just by one or two people. Others also must play a supporting role. Community members, financial sponsors, board members, and others all play key roles in the creation and maintenance of a successful nonprofit. However, each of these people are some way woven into the fabric of the dream. Some of these folks are more central to the creation and maintenance of a nonprofit than others. For example, the donor who donates a building may be more central to the outcome of the organizing process than the donor who gives ten dollars. However, both of these individuals have at least one key commonality—they were captured by the dream weaver’s vision.

References
