

## **Order Out of Chaos**

### **By Mel Schwartz**

The words, order and chaos, are particularly value laden. We tend to embrace order and avoid chaos at all costs. I've come to wonder why that is so. And more to the point, what do we mean by order or chaos? I am proposing that these interpretations and normative values do much to confuse us and ultimately to constrain our growth and vitality. Let's start by examining what these terms suggest.

The notion of order is rather equivalent to a sense of predictability. Predictability in this form lets us know what we can expect. It speaks almost of a range of motion. A pendulum, unaffected by friction, will follow its predetermined path. We know just how far it will travel to either point in its arc before beginning its return. Predictability relies upon certainty and prognosticated outcomes. It has been a major tenet of our culture and our science for many hundreds of years.

In our lives, order suggests that we know the parameters of our experience, as if the boundaries are determined in advance. The emotional and psychological highs and lows are familiar. The rules of relationship are understood. Knowing the range of our experiences provides a sense of order. As such, order creates a comfort zone as we can be assured of familiar terrain.

Chaos, on the other hand, suggests an absence of predictability. It represents the unknown, which for most people is very problematic if not outright daunting. It is a venturing into uncertain territory. Sometimes life's transitions or crises present chaos in the form of illness, death, divorce, job loss, etc. These events are thrust upon us and we do the best we can to cope with them, aided by family and professional support. At times, we buffer the roller coaster ride through chaos with medication.

Sometimes, people seem to slip into personal chaos without any apparent reason. The struggle that ensues may feel like a crisis, but learning to navigate it rather than shutting it down can have rich rewards. The inclination to flee from chaos and return to order tends to stunt our growth, as it precludes vital new learning and experience. Although personal chaos can be most upsetting and threatening, it also provides tremendous opportunity for personal evolution. Learning to accommodate the disquiet is the goal.

In science, order is known as a state of equilibrium, with its incumbent predictability. Yet, there are times when a system moves far from equilibrium and approaches what we might refer to as chaos. In such a state a single small fluctuation can throw the system (or person) into chaos. This is known in science as a bifurcation point. This is a fancy word for the point of departure where we head into new territory. This is more commonly referred to as a tipping point. When Rosa Parks was too tired to give up her seat on the bus to a White man and remained in seating barred to African Americans, a tipping point ensued and the civil rights movement was catalyzed. When systems or organisms, including people, reach such a point, chaos ensues. Yet out of that chaos there is a spiraling up effect which leads to a new ordering. We move into a transformative process

whereby we can evolve more thoroughly. In other words, chaos leads to a deeper and more evolved state of order. It's simply a process along the way.

One difficulty lays in the fact that we live with a cultural imperative that values predictability and shuns if not outright disdains uncertainty, let alone chaos. Yet, without accepting some degree of chaos, our lives become programmed in a deterministic way that precludes growth. A question arose recently in one of our emergent thinking groups which addressed this issue: Does personal transformation have to be catalyzed by some measure of crisis or struggle? After a prolonged discussion we came to an understanding that ordinarily it does.

As a therapist, I see my role in such circumstances as not automatically trying to restore order, but assisting as a guide through the chaos toward a new and more evolving experience. This is the new territory that I previously referred to. It's a terrain of greater complexity and richness. Small or moderate doses of chaos can bring us to higher levels of personal evolution. I'm not speaking of uncontrolled chaos, which is anxiety producing or worse. I'm referring to embracing a reasonable degree of uncertainty as the flow of life presents wonderful opportunities for our enrichment. Chaos is simply a word. We might do well to ask why we are so reactive to it.

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Mel Schwartz is a visionary psychotherapist, thinker and author who earned his graduate degree from Columbia University. He has been a keynote speaker at Yale University. Mel is the author of *The Art of Intimacy*, *The Pleasure of Passion* and is currently writing, *Emergent Thinking*®. He is the founder of the *Emergent Thinking*® Process. He is in private practice in Westport, CT. and Mt. Kisco, NY. Visit his web site at [www.MelSchwartz.com](http://www.MelSchwartz.com).