

The Imaginal Cells of Illuman



As much of the world (though not all) edges out of the pandemic, we are ready to breathe a sigh of relief—except that the breath catches in our throats. None of us can escape the awareness, even a pressure we feel when we consider the global effects of climate change, ever-shifting geopolitics, and huge disruptions in the Western world’s economic systems. In the United States, the forces of racism divide our nation.

Those of us connected with Illuman are working to discern what the wisdom traditions have to offer in guiding us as Illuman to respond in kind to this. We’re beginning to suspect that the “tried and true” applies to yesterday’s context. Today, in its deepest and broadest manifestation, is calling us to respond imaginatively, courageously, maybe even boldly—but, most importantly, authentically. What does it even mean to “be” an organization today? How do we link the through line and truth of our beginnings and our growth to what we are to become in this emerging world that is **so different** than the one that birthed Illuman?

We invite you to join the open-ended conversation that we’re having at Illuman now. There is a lot on the line. It’s not exaggerating to say that our futures rely on how we respond right now.

Here are some insights from We are Open Circle (WOC) founder Adam Rumack about the Reweaving of Illuman, a continuing transformational process.

Steve Hicken
Board Chair, Illuman

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The World Is Changing

I could have said this two years ago, twenty years ago, even 2000 years ago. Every generation has been through evolutionary change. Members of every generation have mourned the loss of the way things were or fought for change, even as the future has come rushing in, despite resistance or welcome.

Learning to ride these waves of change has been a central work of wisdom traditions, which is perhaps why they have risen up during times of great uncertainty and increasing complexity. Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed, and a plethora of other wisdom teachers arrived within 500 years of each other to provide humanity with a rudder to navigate particularly tumultuous seas of change (called the “axial age” by historians, some of whom suggest we are in a similar age now).

Ironically, institutions arose around these teachers to preserve their teachings. Institutions, though, have identities and structures of their own that become fixed and resistant to change. Inevitably, though, revelation creates revolution, revolution eventually settles into status quo, eventually returns again to revelation, and so on.

Revelation comes quickly these days. So quickly that humanity, and its microcosmic communities called “organizations,” are struggling to cope with the rapidity of change and the amount of information, geographic complexity, and human diversity tossed around on the seas of today’s changes.

Two Types of Change

We are Open Circle focuses on two general types of challenges that change creates.

The first are technical challenges. These can be identified by their solutions. For example: Your feet hurt, so your orthopedist prescribes insoles to match your feet. Problem solved, for the short term at least. Most consultants and business solutions focus on technical solutions. However, not all challenges

are technical. That's why most change, learning and development, and organizational development processes fail in the long term.

The second variety of challenges created by change are adaptive. Let's say, in the example above, the technical solution (insoles) don't work. Your feet still hurt, even when you adjust the prescription (technical solution) a few times. So, you either accept pain, and your body adapts to it through further imbalance (and likely, pain and structural degradation), or you start thinking about the pain as a symptom of a systemic issue in the organism that is your body. This is a much longer journey of inquiry, experimentation (iteration), and change. In this journey, the process is as important as the outcome, because you are learning about all the parts of the system as you try, fail, and try again. The iterative process gives you information that will come in very handy when, say, your foot pain is long gone but you now have knee pain. Knowing the system of your body, you have much more material and experience to adjust for inevitable future challenges and change.

We are Open Circle deals primarily in adaptive change. It's a hard sell, because the process is highly educational and experimental, involves many more stakeholders, takes longer than a quick prescription, has little obvious precedent for many, and, at some point, requires that both we and the organizations we work with let go of our strategies, easy answers, and any promise of continuity of power structures. In other words, we must step together into the liminal space of "not knowing" as part of a transformative journey.

What Is Transformation?

Simply put, transformation is the transition from one state into another. For this to happen, a current state needs to literally or figuratively die. Depending on how identified we are with the first state, letting go of it will be accordingly tough.

Illuman is involved in an untethering from the known shore of Illuman's current design. Men of Illuman are setting aside their strategies, their roles, and their knowing, and are inviting the whole of the organization into liminal space on a journey of transformation.

Imaginal Cells

Using the now-popular analogy of the caterpillar transforming into a butterfly, we can get a sense of just how treacherous and beautiful this collective possibility can be by comparing the human response to change to how the more-than-human world transforms.

Like humans, when a caterpillar begins its transformation, it already has the seeds of its future possibility. This possibility is contained within parts of the organism called “imaginal” cells. Animated by the spirit of life that made the caterpillar, when the conditions of age and environment are just right, the imaginal cells begin to replicate, fighting the butterfly’s immune system toward their predetermined victory. These cells then create an organism completely different from the one out of which they originated, and fly away.

As far as we know, caterpillar, imaginal, and butterfly cells don’t have individual identities (“egos”), so caterpillar cells don’t fear change, the imaginal cells don’t fight for a utopian future where they can fly from flower to flower, and the butterfly doesn’t mourn a past state as a caterpillar. In other words, the more-than-human world doesn’t struggle with change in the same psychologically complex way human communities do. Humans take sides, position ourselves through rank and class, try to convince each other (and ourselves) about the rightness or wrongness of our views or of the change itself, and so on.

Having torn ourselves (psychologically) from the intricate webs of nature, we humans struggle through change in myriad ways. The multiplicity of strategies for this struggle makes collective change processes incredibly complex. Polarization, power struggles, seeking inappropriately quick (technical) solutions, and warfare of the cultural and martial varieties are some responses to collective change.

Amidst the steady march of time, change will happen. The struggle, the war (personal and collective), is more of an option. We are Open Circle’s service, in essence, is about helping organizations like Illuman, communities, and individuals see and use the range of options available to us in navigating the seas of change. As one friend and business partner said, this can be a profoundly mystical and deeply practical journey at the same time: Gathering up our light and shadows, joining hands, and taking the next steps on a long and often mysterious journey of change.

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