

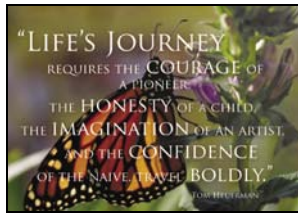


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## FEELING ALIVE

**Note to Readers:** This Pamphlet is the introduction to the book *The Magic of Self-Directed Work Teams* by **Paul Palmes**. Paul tells the transformation story of **Northern Pipe Products** in Fargo, North Dakota.

This local story carries universal lessons.

See "Tom's Thought" for more about Paul and Northern Pipe Products. ([Order the book](#))

If not us, who?  
If not here, where?  
If not now, when?  
If not for the kingdom, why?  
Dare the dream.  
Anonymous

Feeling alive came natural as a kid—a time when we live a life of learning and adventure as we explore and master our worlds. We venture out bravely, don't know the rules, adapt as we go, and have fun living out our fantasies of being courageous heroes and heroines who do good for others.

Somewhere along the way conformity and compliance become the rules--about the time we go to school, I imagine. I believe from then on most of us sacrifice much of our courage and authenticity as we try to fit in to be accepted by others in order to "succeed."

Perhaps like you, I've always chafed against the rules of conformity and compliance even as I've tried to find

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a place for myself in this world. I've taken a long journey to regain my natural and authentic sense of purpose and gradually found powerful meaning in my life.

Such a journey of self-discovery beckons leaders today. The work is hard. Perhaps as difficult as anything a human being will do in life--as a person, leader, or follower. This personal development requires the courage of a pioneer, the honesty of a child, the imagination of an artist, and the confidence of the naïve, and often begins from deep despair, disillusionment, and a change of mind. The journey gives one a special energy and changes the traveler forever.

As a college student at the University of Minnesota in the late 60's, I found part of that special energy in the love of study and learning. I majored in sociology and psychology and my school work was my play.

As a Secret Service Agent who chased counterfeiters in Chicago and protected Presidents, Vice Presidents, and foreign dignitaries around the world, I found more of the aliveness as I lived a compelling mission and was a member of a great team.

As a recovering alcoholic for more than 30 years, I've found power in the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous—a spiritual guide perfect for leaders and followers alike in the chaotic world of today. I learned that there are no quick-fixes in life and that deep spiritual principles exist that can guide our lives better than rule books. I must live a value driven life.

I found more of the special intensity in nine management positions over 18 years at the Star Tribune Newspaper in Minneapolis, Minnesota. There I found the strength of conviction, the power of truth, and the courage required to live a value-driven life in a dysfunctional corporate world where inauthenticity remains the first rule of survival and where ethics are often an inconvenience. I learned to stand alone when necessary.

In my last leadership position I led a 4,500 employee business unit through transformational change (a fundamental shift of values, culture, and operating practices). My eyes and heart were opened by the power of authenticity (inner and outer congruence)

and the massive untapped potential in people and organizations. When I left the corporate world in 1994 the CEO of the company said my leadership had changed the organization forever. I don't know about that, but I was changed forever.

I left the corporate world to seek what was real full time. I would complete a Ph.D. in organizational development, travel to Africa to study nature and photograph the wildlife, and I would write and consult.

I wanted to learn about the deep dynamics of change. I wanted to understand why most organizations are such mediocre messes. I wanted to develop my own vision for what our organizations can become and my own vision of a more highly evolved leader. I wanted to take my own Heroes Journey, and I wanted to be my own learning laboratory.

I was not a wealthy man and my choice to venture out alone was not without risk. I realized that if I failed financially no one would remember in a few short years. But if I did not take the journey into the unknown, I would live with my cowardice and the disappointment of my own unfulfilled potential for eternity. Those alternatives have guided my decisions since the choice to leave the pseudo-safety of the parent-like corporate world.

I studied philosophy, psychology, spirituality, quantum physics, and chaos theory. I studied human development and leadership. I spent a lot of time with smart and curious people who sought the same aliveness I wanted. I began to write. I had never used a computer and my grammar was bad. But I had things I wanted to say, and I was willing to suffer the humiliations of the novice. I hired a tough writer to coach me and began to learn anew.

I completed my Ph.D. in organizational development in 1997 at the age of 52. What a grand gift it was to be able to take time out at mid-life to learn and explore again as I did as a child. This was a time of high energy.

Today I live my life as an ongoing series of high energy experiences punctuated by time to rest, renew, and reflect.

As a consultant since 1994, I realize more deeply than

ever before how difficult it is to lead change and how invested many remain in ways of doing things that no longer bring forth the results we want. I am sorry to say I also see how mediocre much of leadership is and how many followers collude with and get the leadership they want. Many organizations are in desperate need of renewal. I also occasionally meet authentic and courageous men and women who struggle against the odds to bring about sustainable change and human growth in our organizations.

Always on the lookout for what is genuine, I listened to the group from Northern Pipe Products of Fargo, North Dakota as they spoke at an ethics luncheon sponsored by *The Center for Ethical Leadership* at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota. Paul, the quality guy, was high energy and exuded enthusiasm—a true believer in what he did at Northern Pipe. Wayne, the president of the company, was humble, soft-spoken, and easy to be around. Kristin learns from these mature leaders who prepare her to lead in the future.

They spoke of the workplace at Northern Pipe and new tools like self-managed work teams, open book management, and continuous learning along with the various tools of the quality movement they excel in. I was more interested in their depth, passion, idealism, and human connection than in the tools they used to organize and express themselves—as interesting as those programs are.

A few months later I participated in a book discussion group led by Paul, Wayne, and Kristin. At the end of our last discussion, Paul Voorhees, the quiet leader at Northern Pipe, invited me to visit the company. We met in the conference room—Paul, Wayne, Kristin, and several other leaders at Northern Pipe Products. We talked with high energy for two hours. They gave me a tour of their plant.

I thought, “These people are for real.” They stand apart from most others I work with in the organizational world. I can tell they are in the midst of a special experience by the way they talk, what they talk about, their appreciation for the difficulty of true and sustainable change, and a focus on their vision that does not waver. They have a grace and compassion about them that only people in pursuit of noble goals have. They exude the quiet pride of true

adventurers. They have found their life's work.

In the late 90's the leaders at Northern Pipe Products in wind-swept Fargo, North Dakota changed their minds. They realized that the old ways of success would no longer work in a competitive world of rapid change where, more and more, people want to work for a cause not just an income.

The inner shift needed to change our leadership to fit the times in which we live is not a linear movement "from" something "to" something else. Instead the shift expands our consciousness to a world view that encompasses more of life. Our world view changes and our philosophy of life changes. We understand in new ways how life creates. We will never see the world in the same ways again. From our new insights, new mental models and techniques emerge.

The leaders at Northern Pipe realized that they thought of organizations and the people in them as machines. Leadership from this metaphor emphasizes the qualities of a machine: control, stability, efficiency, reliability, prediction, measurement and production of results, and the whole arsenal of competitive, adversarial systems. Life in this world is black and white; the grays are denied.

The machine metaphor provided the conceptual framework for how we designed organizations and management practices over the past 300 years. We created bureaucracies with hierarchal, compartmentalized, and functionalized departments with rigid and impermeable boundaries. Managers control people with performance appraisals, discipline procedures, and an unlimited variety of incentive plans. Conformity became the first rule of organizational life. Heroic leaders stay away from workers and creativity, initiative, and innovation come from the top or from outside the organization. Organizations became entitled, addictive, and paternalistic. The traditional culture at Northern Pipe Products reflected this organizational model.

This metaphor of the machine is necessary and works fine—for machinery, space travel, and linear work processes. The gigantic mistake that changed the world and affected all of our lives was the application of the machine metaphor to people and other living entities, including organizations. People began to

think mechanically and acted like machines and treated one another as machines. Leaders in this metaphor act like mechanics who fix machinery.

With the machine metaphor the five senses no longer mattered and ethics, spirit, values, quality, and consciousness were marginalized. The chapter titles of this book reflect this disconnection from life's energy: "It's Always the Same," "Wrong Models," "The Failure of Half Measures," and a section of the book entitled, "Out of the Darkness."

The leaders of change at Northern Pipe Products had their moments of metanoia and expanded their consciousness and realized that the linear and mechanical process of a manufacturing plant and of the quality tools they used with great expertise were not the "whole" world but were embedded in a living and dynamic system of high energy filled with creative potential. In the mechanistic world this energy is denied, dampened, and ignored. In a dynamic world this energy is the vast untapped human potential of renewal. Most of what is important in life is found in the grays the machine model ignores.

The quality movement depends on linear tools, thinking, and processes. But, I would argue, the quality movement is only a fragment of what it could be if it expanded its perspective to have a world view that encompasses more of life—from a mechanical metaphor of organizations to an organic AND a mechanical metaphor each used appropriately. If we increase our metaphorical diversity, we multiply our creative potential to evolve our organizations.

In the past century new metaphors that offer a more comprehensive and inclusive view of the world emerged from biology, ecology, quantum physics, chaos and complexity theory, and other sciences. These metaphors describe "living systems," such as people and organizations, as alive, interconnected, and energy filled creative potential. Joined with psychology, philosophy, and spirituality the metaphors of these sciences provide the concepts of a new world view. The science teaches us about adaptation, creativity, and sustainability while the spiritual, psychological, and philosophical teach us about freedom, responsibility, and accountability. The metaphor of the organization as machine is replaced by the organization as a dynamic system with a lot of

machines in it.

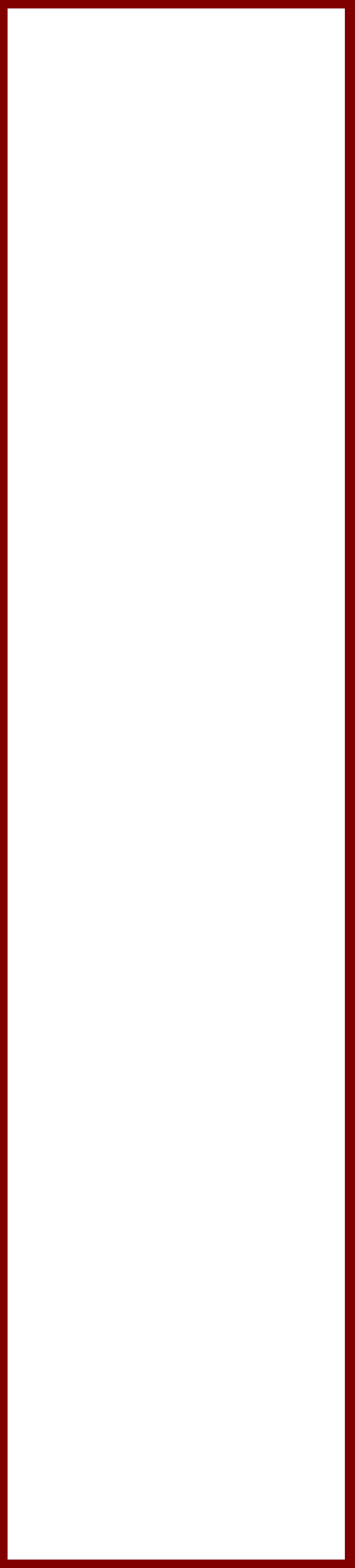
The implications of a living system (or ecological) worldview for leadership and organizational life are profound. An organic world view frees us to be authentic and the world most needs leaders of deep authenticity. The diversity we force into conformity becomes the essence of life and sustainability. The truths we do not talk about become essential to our development. The information we hoard becomes nutrition for the enterprise. The chaos and conflict we dampen become the energy of creativity.

The relationships we refuse become the conduits of innovation. The emotions we deny become life's energy from which vitality emerges. The false values we espouse become real and inspire courage. The personal and organizational identities we neglect to get acquainted with become the path to authenticity and provide the conceptual controls that guide members of our organizations toward a common destination. The way we think about change is transformed. You will see all of these dynamics in this book and the story of Northern Pipe Products.

Transformation requires courage, service, sacrifice, and intellectual vigor. The expansion of consciousness and coming out on the other side of their own existential crisis led to new life and energy at Northern Pipe Products. Part three of this book is entitled "A New Day" and reflects the light that shines when new awareness emerges.

At Northern Pipe Products Company the complexity of how people work, lead, and follow together grows in new and innovative ways. Their leaders embrace the risk, honesty, and loneliness of a leader's journey within: a creative odyssey of challenge, excitement, stimulation, and development of who they can be as people and as new leaders. This growth is a conscious evolution of aspects of the self long dormant in the industrial world. And they bring forth great business results.

The leaders at Northern Pipe Products still lead, but differently. Instead of telling people what to do, they ask them questions and provide them with information. They give employees time to be in relationship together so the wisdom in the system can emerge. They give people freedom to make decisions



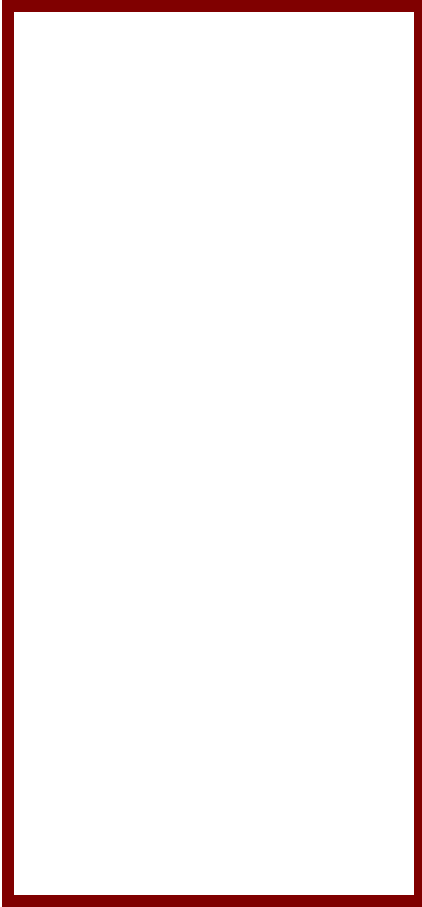
and to take action about the work they do, and they hold them accountable. The leaders at Northern Pipe Products teach others how to do things for themselves and require them to do so. They listen instead of talk (well, Wayne listens. Paul loves to talk). Rather than control people, they create conditions that free others to use their capabilities. Most of all they model the change they want to see in others.

Changes in people are obvious. Those people who have been among the walking dead for years came alive and make important new contributions. Leaders recognized unnoticed talents in people and feel new energy in them as they make new contributions. People took new initiative, and teams perform great feats. The organization's performance improved in dramatic and unpredictable ways. Great employees now stick around instead of quitting after hours or days on the job.

The courageous rebels and artists at Northern Pipe Products are among the vanguard of human and organizational evolution. They rebel against the old organizational rules and create new forms to capitalize on human potential. They face the dangers and hardships all pioneers face as they create new organizational structures and processes where nothing existed before. Leadership development is difficult and requires tremendous commitment: to new learning, feedback and dialogue, a deep examination of beliefs, and a decision to change fundamental assumptions. Our higher level of maturity requires the development of latent capabilities, and the practice of new skills.

They aren't perfect. They know they will make mistakes as they go toward their vision. They proceed confident they can learn and adapt along the way. When they make a mistake they say, "We are sorry. Let's fix it." And then they move on with greater mutual trust. They renew my hope for what is possible.

Please read their story and learn from the journey of Northern Pipe Products. You cannot copy what they did. You must take your own journey as your personal and organizational reality is uniquely yours. You can, however, learn about the process of change from them and learn from their experiences.



Why would we want to do this hard and risky work? Because we want to be truly human, we want our lives to make a difference, because we want a sustainable and safe world for all of our children, and because the world's work remains unfinished and this is the work the times call for.

Begin your personal or organizational journey or renew the one you have been on. Venture out bravely, feel alive, make new rules, adapt as you go, and have fun living out your fantasies of being brave heroes and heroines doing good for others.

Should you fail in a material sense, no one will remember your disappointment in a few short years and at least you will use your time here well. Should you lack the courage to live your life's adventure, you will regret your cowardice for all of eternity. Which legacy do you want to leave?