

## **Surprise, Transformation & Excellence Through “Spontaneous Discovery”: A Personal Saga**

*"Thinking is the enemy of creativity. It's self-conscious and anything self-conscious is lousy. You simply must ... Do things."*—Ray Bradbury

*"By indirection direction find."*—Hamlet, II. I

*"To be playful is to allow for unlimited possibility."*—James Carse

*"No one rises so high as he who knows not where he is going."*—Oliver Cromwell

*"What are [aircraft designer Burt] Rutan's management rules? He insists he doesn't have any. 'I don't like rules,' he says. 'Things are so easy to change if you don't write them down.' Rutan feels good management works in much the same way good aircraft design does: Instead of trying to figure out the best way to do something and sticking to it, just try out an approach and keep fixing it."*—Eric Abrahamson & David Freedman, Chapter 8, "Messy Leadership," from *A Perfect Mess: The Hidden Benefits of Disorder*

*"This is so simple it sounds stupid, but it is amazing how few oil people really understand that you only find oil if you drill wells. You may think you're finding it when you're drawing maps and studying logs, but you have to drill."*—John Masters, *The Hunters* (Masters was a wildly successful Canadian Oil & Gas wildcatter.)

**Summer 2009 was the summer of brush clearing.  
And, it turned out, much more.**

**It started as simple exercise. After a day or two, scratches from head to toe, and enjoyment, I set myself a goal of clearing a little space to get a better view of one of the farm ponds. That revealed something else ... to my surprise.**

**At a casual dinner, I sat next to a landscaper, and we got to talking about our farm and my skills with clipper, saw, etc. In particular, she suggested that I do some clearing around a few of our big boulders. Intrigued, I set about clearing, on our main trail, around a couple of said boulders. I was again amazed at the result.**

**That in turn led to attacking some dense brush and brambles around some barely visible rocks that had always intrigued me—which led to “finding,” in effect, a great place for a more or less “Zen garden,” as we’ve taken to calling it.**

**Which led to ... more and more. And more.**

**To make a long story short:**

**(1) I now have a new hobby, and maybe, ye gads, my life’s work for years to come. This winter I’ll do a little, but I also plan to read up on outdoor spaces, Zen gardens, etc; visit some rock gardens—spaces close by or amidst my travels; and, indeed, concoct a more or less plan (rough sketches) for next spring’s activities—though I’m sure that what I do will move forward mostly by what I discover as I move forward. (What discovers itself may actually be a better way to put it—there’s a “hidden hand” here.) As I’m beginning to see it, this is at least a 10-year project—maybe even a multi-generation project.**

**(2) I proceeded by trial and error and instinct, and each experiment led to/suggested another experiment (or 2 or 10) and to a greater understanding of potential—the “plan,” though there was none, made itself. And it was far, far better (more ambitious, more interesting, more satisfying) than I would have imagined. In fact, the result to date bears little or no relationship to what I was thinking about at the start—a trivial self-designed chore may become the engine of my next decade; the “brushcutting project” is now leading Susan and me to view our entire property, and what it might represent, in a new light.**

**(3) I was able to do much more than I’d dreamed—overall, and project by project. “Systems thinking”? It would have killed the whole thing. (Don’t get me started. Or do: Re-read the epigraphs at the top of this essay.)**

**(4) Is “everything connected to every thing else”? Well, sure. But I had no idea *how* everything was connected to everything else until I began (thank you, Michael Schrage) “serious play.”**

**(5) Note (more of the same): I got a pacemaker for Christmas a couple of years ago; the #1 no-no is using a chain saw. (The magnetic field is fearsome.) Taking that warning a step farther, I decided to do this project entirely with hand tools. Of course that means more exercise—a good thing. *But the “great wonder,” again unexpected, is that the resultant slowness and quiet is the de facto engine of my entire spontaneous discovery process.***

**(6) Note: Some of you will have discovered my implicit debt to the economist-of-freedom: F.A. Hayek. His stunningly clear view of market capitalism as a “spontaneous discovery process” is my intellectual bedrock, my “context” for three decades in Silicon Valley, and now even for my recreational pursuits (which are, as noted, becoming so much more than that).**

**(7) To some extent, the fact that you are reading this is because I’ve been “on the map” since co-authoring *In Search of Excellence* in 1982. That book at its heart featured “Eight Basics of Excellence.” One item obviously has to come first, and it’d be even “more first” if I updated the book today. Namely “A Bias For Action.” In part in 1982 we were reacting to companies that were in deep trouble, in large measure due to losing touch with the reality of what they made and the “real people” (front-line employees) who made it. They had become too reliant on the Holy Strategic Plan. We pushed “get out in the field, leave the plan behind, and get on with it ... right now.” The “get out in the field” imperative was couched in terms not only of that ‘bias for action,’ but also our favorite 4-letter prescription, stolen from a then vibrant Hewlett-Packard. Namely: MBWA. Managing By Wandering Around—get out of the office, leave “MBA thinking” behind—and feel your way around the Real World—i.e., do a little “spontaneous discovery.” Which, of course, to repeat, is the heart of this little essay—and indeed the centerpiece and soul of my life’s work to this day.**