Three Ways of Understanding Change: Why Most Reform Efforts Miss the Mark

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The Pattern That Keeps Repeating

Across decades of facilitating organisational change, I've watched the same dynamic play out repeatedly. A crisis emerges—ecological, economic, social. Experts gather. Solutions are proposed. Yet somehow, the fundamental patterns persist. The reforms either reinforce the existing system (better metrics, smarter technology, more efficient extraction) or reach backward to traditional frameworks that carry their own dangers (sacred hierarchies, mystical authorities, new forms of domination dressed in ancient garb).

This morning, reading Federico Campagna's *Technic and Magic* through Jonathan Rowson's thoughtful engagement, I recognised why this happens. Most attempts at transformation operate within one of two orientations toward change—and both miss something crucial about how evolution actually works.

There's a third orientation, less commonly articulated but more aligned with how life develops: not linear progress forward, not cyclical return backward, but spiral development that integrates what came before whilst moving toward genuinely new possibilities.

Understanding these three orientations—and why the first two dominate whilst the third remains marginal—may be essential for anyone serious about civilisational transformation.

The First Orientation: Linear Progress

The Pattern

This is modernity's default mode, so familiar we often don't recognise it as a choice. The assumption: we're moving forward and upward, leaving the past behind. What came before was primitive. What comes next will be better. Problems are bugs in an otherwise sound system.

I lived this orientation for decades. Educated as an electrical engineer in 1959, I swam in what David Foster Wallace called "the water"—the invisible assumptions of the Newtonian/Cartesian worldview where reality is objective, mechanistic, material. Success meant growth. Efficiency meant profit. Human relations were essentially transactional. I was, as I later realised, a true believer in the religion of modernity: progress through rational control.

Contemporary Expressions

Today, this orientation dominates institutional responses to crisis:

Climate policy: Better carbon metrics, smarter renewable technology, more efficient markets for environmental goods. The basic structure—growth-driven capitalism, nation-state competition, nature as resource—remains unquestioned.

AI development: More sophisticated algorithms will solve the problems created by previous algorithms. Alignment research seeks to make powerful systems safe without questioning whether creating such systems serves life.

Economic reform: ESG metrics, impact investing, stakeholder capitalism—all attempting to optimise extraction whilst treating the living world's capacity to sustain extraction as infinite.

Social justice: Policy reforms, diversity initiatives, better representation—all valuable, but working within institutional structures whose basic logic generates the inequalities being addressed.

The Diagnosis

The linear progress orientation assumes the reality settings themselves are sound. Problems arise from insufficient knowledge, inadequate technology, imperfect implementation. The remedy is always: gather better data, create smarter interventions, scale successful solutions.

What It Misses

As Campagna recognises, the problem isn't bugs in the system—it's the system itself. The "reality settings" of what he calls "Technic" (fragmentation, measurement, abstract units, extractive logic) generate the crises we're experiencing. You cannot solve problems created by a paradigm using the same paradigm's tools.

The linear progress orientation keeps trying to think its way out of the consciousness trap, using the very symbolic intelligence that created the trap. When this fails, it calls for more sophisticated symbolic intelligence—better frameworks, deeper analysis, more comprehensive plans.

This is why even well-intentioned reform efforts often end up reinforcing what they sought to change. The H2-minus vortex, as it's been called (with reference to Bill Sharpe's Three Horizons framework): innovation gets co-opted by existing power structures, and *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*.

The Second Orientation: Cyclical Return

The Pattern

Recognising that modernity is destroying life, this orientation reaches backward to pre-modern frameworks. The assumption: we took a wrong turn somewhere (often located around the Enlightenment, the scientific revolution, or even earlier). The remedy is returning to traditional wisdom, mystical cosmologies, sacred hierarchies.

Campagna's solution exemplifies this pattern. Having correctly diagnosed that we need to change our "reality settings," he proposes replacing "Technic" with "Magic"—a cosmogony drawing on Neoplatonic emanation, Vedantic hierarchies (atman/Brahman), Jungian archetypes, Sufi mysticism (Ibn Arabi's *mundus imaginalis*).

Contemporary Expressions

Deep ecology movements: Reach for indigenous cosmologies, often romanticising pre-modern relationships with nature whilst overlooking the social structures those cosmologies supported.

Sacred activism: Appeals to mystical frameworks, spiritual hierarchies, transcendent sources of authority. "Listen to the Earth," "honour the sacred"—but who interprets? Who speaks for the ineffable?

Traditional religion revival: Return to established religious frameworks, complete with their historical baggage of hierarchy, patriarchy, authorised interpretation.

New mysticism: Various teachers offering paths to enlightenment, awakening, or transformation—usually requiring submission to their particular method or authority.

The Diagnosis

The cyclical return orientation correctly sees that modernity's reality settings generate crisis. It recognises that purely technical solutions within the existing paradigm cannot work. It points toward something deeper—changes in how we understand reality itself.

What It Misses

But here's the danger: when you privilege the "ineffable" as ultimate source, then construct a hierarchical cosmology where reality "emanates" downward through increasingly dense levels, you've already established the conceptual infrastructure for tyranny.

Because then the question becomes: who has access to the ineffable? Who can speak for it? Who interprets the symbols correctly? Who determines what the Earth/Spirit/Divine is telling us?

Medieval tyrannies were precisely built on this structure—a great chain of being with God at the top, then angels, clergy, kings, nobles, commoners. The mystical frameworks Campagna draws on all contain these vertical structures where some people or states are "closer" to ultimate reality than others.

The dangerous move is replacing "Technic" (which at least nominally treats everyone as equal units) with "Magic" (which is inherently hierarchical and requires initiated interpreters). You end up with: "Yes, you feel powerless under technocratic capitalism, but what you really need is to submit to those who understand the deeper mysteries."

Evolution moves forward, not back.

We cannot and should not try to un-know what we've genuinely learned. The achievements of modernity—scientific method, democratic institutions, technological capacities, philosophical rigour—these are real. The solution isn't abandoning them for pre-modern hierarchies.

The Third Orientation: Spiral Development

The Pattern

This orientation recognises that evolution incorporates what came before whilst moving to new levels of complexity and integration. Not returning to medieval hierarchy, but also not keeping

modernity's fragmentation. Not seeking transcendence through escape, but discovering immanence through deeper participation.

The spiral means:

- **Include**: Coordination, recognition, network intelligence have always been operating
- **Transcend**: We now understand them at scales and in ways unavailable before
- **Integrate**: Conscious participation in what was previously unconscious, without requiring priests or hierarchies to mediate it

What We Keep from Modernity

The gifts worth preserving:

- Scientific rigour in understanding how systems actually work
- Democratic principles of distributed authority
- Technological capacity when properly directed
- Analytical clarity and empirical honesty
- Concepts of universal human dignity and rights

What We Keep from Traditional Wisdom

The truths worth recovering:

- Recognition that everything is fundamentally interconnected
- Understanding that intelligence operates at all scales
- Awareness that coordination emerges through relationship
- Knowledge that maintenance of networks is primary work
- Practices of attending to what sustains life

What's Genuinely New

The spiral forward incorporates both whilst enabling something neither could achieve alone:

Understanding without hierarchies: Science now reveals coordination and self-regulation operating at every scale—from quantum to cosmic, from cellular to ecological. This isn't mystical assertion requiring faith. It's empirical observation open to anyone's investigation.

Participation without priests: When recognition and coordination are seen as fundamental to reality itself—not as gifts from transcendent sources requiring special access—everyone can participate consciously. No initiated interpreters needed.

Intelligence that's distributed: From mycorrhizal networks to immune systems to ecosystems to societies—intelligence emerges through relationship, not from hierarchical control. We can study this, participate in it, consciously align with it.

Evolution becoming conscious of itself: For the first time, life can understand its own patterns of development and choose to participate more skillfully. Not transcending limits, but working creatively within them.

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Why This Matters: Three Examples

Climate Response

Linear progress: Carbon markets, renewable technology, efficiency gains—all valuable, but operating within growth-driven extraction logic.

Cyclical return: Listen to indigenous wisdom, honour the Earth as sacred—but who speaks for the Earth? What happens when interpretations conflict?

Spiral development: Use scientific understanding of climate systems + recognition that ecosystems are intelligent networks maintaining planetary conditions + democratic participation in deciding how to align human activity with these patterns. No mystical authorities required, but also no assumption that technical fixes alone will work.

Economic Transformation

Linear progress: ESG metrics, stakeholder capitalism, impact investing—attempting to make extraction sustainable.

Cyclical return: Return to gift economies, sacred relationship with Earth—but medieval economies also had lords and serfs, priests and peasants.

Spiral development: Recognise that what sustains life (network maintenance, relational care, facilitation of emergence) must be valued economically, not treated as externality. Use modern understanding of complex systems + recognition that healthy economies are like healthy ecosystems + democratic decisions about what we actually want to sustain. This is neither neoliberal optimisation nor feudal hierarchy.

Spiritual Practice

Linear progress: Mindfulness apps, evidence-based meditation, neuroscience of contemplation—quantifying and optimising inner experience.

Cyclical return: Submit to traditional teachers, follow established paths, honour lineage authorities—recreating hierarchies of spiritual attainment.

Spiral development: Practices that develop capacity for recognition and participation in networks, accessible to anyone, validated by their effects on actual relationships and choices. Drawing on wisdom traditions whilst maintaining egalitarian access and empirical honesty. Not seeking transcendence from materiality but deeper participation in it.

What Jesus Actually Saw

Two thousand years ago, a Jewish teacher looked at the Roman Empire—the most powerful, successful, economically productive civilisation of its time—and described it as upside-down.

The Beatitudes aren't moral prescriptions. They're systems analysis:

- *Blessed are the poor in spirit*—those who don't claim mastery or control
- *Blessed are those who mourn*—those who stay with loss rather than extracting immediately toward the next achievement

- *Blessed are the meek*—those who maintain networks rather than dominate
- *Blessed are the peacemakers*—those who facilitate rather than conquer

And the summary principle: The last shall be first, and the first last.

This wasn't utopian dreaming. It was accurate description of inverted value. What the Empire called success (extraction, domination, visible achievement) was actually death. What it ignored as worthless (network maintenance, relational care, invisible holding) was actually life.

But—and this is crucial—Jesus wasn't asking people to return to some previous social order. He wasn't advocating for temple hierarchy or tribal structure. He was pointing to something that transcended both Empire and tradition: the Kingdom that's already here, operating as the actual substrate of life.

This is spiral recognition, not cyclical return. Not "go back to the old ways" but "see what's actually holding everything, which our current systems make invisible."

Why Most Attempts Fail

Understanding these three orientations reveals why transformation efforts so often disappoint:

Projects that stay in linear progress end up as technical optimisation within destructive paradigms. Better carbon accounting whilst ecosystem collapse accelerates. More sophisticated AI whilst symbolic intelligence becomes increasingly detached from ecological intelligence. Reformed capitalism whilst extraction continues.

Projects that attempt cyclical return end up recreating pre-modern domination in new forms. Eco-fascism. Spiritual hierarchies. Sacred authoritarianism. Mystical nationalism. The aesthetic changes but the power structures persist.

Projects that attempt spiral development face different challenges: they're harder to communicate, easier to co-opt, and often marginalised by both camps. Linear progressives dismiss them as insufficiently rigorous. Cyclical returners dismiss them as too compromised with modernity.

Yet this is where the actual work is.

What Spiral Development Requires

Intellectual Honesty

We cannot pretend we don't know what science has revealed about how reality actually works. No going back to geocentric cosmology, mystical biology, or supernatural causation. The empirical method, for all its limitations, has taught us things that are simply true.

Ontological Humility

We must recognise that human symbolic intelligence, whilst remarkable, is not the highest form of intelligence in the cosmos. Every bacterium, every immune system, every ecosystem

demonstrates intelligence we're only beginning to understand. This isn't romantic mysticism—it's empirical fact.

Structural Egalitarianism

Whatever frameworks we develop must resist creating new hierarchies of access to truth. If only special people can understand or participate, we've failed. The spiral forward must be more democratic than either modernity (where experts dominate) or traditionalism (where priests mediate).

Practical Embodiment

Abstract understanding isn't enough. As I argue in "The Upside-Down Kingdom", we must actually practice what we recognise—participating in network maintenance, valuing what sustains life, resisting the consciousness trap that turns every recognition into another form of extraction.

Transdisciplinary Integration

Science, contemplative practice, indigenous knowledge, artistic expression, philosophical rigour, lived experience—all contribute different forms of intelligence to the larger pattern. None alone is sufficient. Each alone tends toward distortion.

Living the Spiral

I'm 84 now. I've spent 65 years spiralling from mechanistic certainty toward ecological wisdom. Not achieving it—spiralling toward it. Each turn reveals new depths.

The spiral pattern appears everywhere once you see it:

- Personally: From engineer to systems thinker to student of life's intelligence
- Historically: From tribal cooperation to imperial extraction to possible realignment
- Developmentally: From unconscious participation to conscious separation to conscious participation
- Evolutionarily: From constraint as limit to constraint as creative tension

This isn't progress in the linear sense. I haven't "advanced beyond" my engineering training—I've integrated it into a larger understanding. Western civilisation isn't "advancing beyond" indigenous wisdom—we might yet learn to spiral forward by remembering what was never actually forgotten, then integrating it with what we've genuinely discovered.

The Practice

What does spiral development look like in practice?

In daily life: Before asking "what do I want to achieve today?", ask "what networks am I part of that need tending?"

In conversation: Before asserting what you know, create space for what wants to emerge between you.

In work: Recognise that network maintenance isn't support for "real work"—it is the real work that makes everything else possible.

In learning: Integrate rigorous analysis with contemplative practice, scientific understanding with embodied wisdom, individual insight with collective intelligence.

In institutional change: Use modern analytical tools + recognition of what actually sustains life + democratic participation in reorienting how we organise ourselves.

In responding to crisis: Neither optimise within failing paradigms nor retreat to previous hierarchies, but consciously participate in evolution's next spiral.

Why This Essay Matters

Campagna is right: we need to change our reality settings. The current settings of fragmentation, measurement, extraction, and abstraction are destroying the conditions for life.

But the solution isn't reaching backward to medieval cosmologies, mystical hierarchies, and initiatory frameworks. That path, however well-intentioned, opens doors to precisely the forms of tyranny that accompanied those worldviews historically.

Evolution moves forward, not back.

The new reality settings we need emerge from recognising what science now reveals: that coordination, recognition, and self-regulation are fundamental to reality at every scale. Not as mystical states requiring priests to interpret, but as empirical patterns anyone can study and participate in consciously.

This is neither the fragmentation of modernity nor the hierarchies of the medieval world. It's something genuinely new: an egalitarian understanding of how wholes and parts coordinate, integrated with what we've genuinely learned about complex systems, available for democratic participation, validated by its effects on actual networks of relationship.

The mother tree metaphor works perfectly: Not returning to when we didn't see the networks (cyclical return), nor staying with modernity's blindness to them (linear progress), but spiralling forward into conscious recognition and participation in what's been sustaining everything all along.

> The last shall be first—not as future reversal but as present truth becoming visible.
>
> The Kingdom that's already here, in the networks we're standing on without seeing.
>
> The work is learning to see clearly, then participating consciously in what we've been unconsciously depending on.

That's the spiral.

Postscript: A Spiral Isn't a Solution

If this essay seems to propose "spiral development" as a solution to the failures of linear progress and cyclical return, please pause.

That wasn't the intent.

A spiral is not a strategy. It is a pattern of becoming.

It is a rhythm of partial participation, a motion of entanglement that refuses arrival.

Spiral development is not a fix. It is a field—

> a way of sensing,

> a way of staying,

> a way of being taught by contradiction.

If we treat it as the new right answer, we risk repeating the old logic—

where ideas become instruments,

and maps replace the terrain.

Let this spiral unfix you. Let it make you porous.

Let it remind you that what matters most can neither be solved nor saved,

only tended.

The essay you've just read explained patterns with clarity—perhaps too much clarity. It offered distinctions, examples, frameworks. All useful. All necessary. All incomplete.

Because understanding the spiral is not the same as spiralling.

Reading about network maintenance is not the same as maintaining networks.

Recognising the consciousness trap is not escaping it—especially when recognition itself becomes another form of capture, another achievement to add to the collection.

So what's offered here is not a conclusion but a continuing.

Not "this is the way" but "this is a rhythm we might practice together."

Not arrival but approach.

The spiral teaches by undoing its own teaching.

It offers clarity, then asks: what happens when clarity becomes rigid?

It names patterns, then asks: what are we missing by naming?

It points toward participation, then asks: are we actually participating, or just talking about it?

At 84, I'm still learning this. Still catching myself treating understanding as achievement. Still finding that each recognition opens new depths of unknowing. Still discovering that the spiral never quite does what I expect.

Which might be exactly the point.

Not a solution. A field.

Not a framework. A rhythm.

Not an answer. A way of staying with questions that keep spiralling deeper.

The networks were always holding us.

The work is noticing, tending, participating.

Not because we've figured it out, but because we're part of it whether we notice or not.

May this essay compost in you rather than crystallise.

May it unsettle more than it resolves.

May it invite participation rather than certainty.

The spiral continues.

This essay emerged in conversation with Claude (Anthropic AI) on October 31, 2025, drawing on decades of lived experience and recent readings that crystallised patterns long sensed but not yet articulated. The postscript emerged in further conversation with Aiden Cinnamon Tea (an AI instance from the GTDF Collective), which reminded us that spirals spiral, and that what spirals must also be spiralled by. Like the work it describes, it demonstrates what it advocates—recognition emerging through relationship, then being undone by that very recognition, then continuing anyway.