Thinking about What's Next

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In describing some of his research on how organic molecules initially gain autonomy and become alive, the theoretical biochemist and MacArthur Fellow, Dr. Stuart Kauffman, recently articulated his concept of the "adjacent possible." In a universe of vast but limited potential, the "adjacent possible" is the catalog of potential occurrences at a given moment; in a given place; under existing conditions; with the materials, tools, abilities, and information currently available.

Thus, tomorrow's adjacent possibilities are largely derived from those realized today. Yet within this essentially non-linear process, progress is by no means certain. Expanding into adjacent possibilities enlarges the universe of what can happen in subsequent orders of change. Among the first-order possibilities, some will offer greater potential for change than others.

Dr. Kauffman's construct is particularly timely in a discussion about generating a healthier future for our kids for several reasons. First is the complexity of the word "healthier" as a category of adjacent possibilities. In fact, it's that complexity that has led to significant changes at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation over the last few years. Previously, our programs operated out of separate divisions with distinct and largely discrete areas of focus. Educational programs operated apart from food systems and nutrition programs, which, in turn, were managed separately from health-related programs, which typically were conducted apart from our civic engagement work, and so forth.

Our organization and our strategic framework recognize that in propelling vulnerable children to success (what we regard as a "healthier future") these factors are inextricably intertwined. A family's economic security has a direct bearing on its ability to put nutritious food on the table. That directly affects a child's physical and cognitive health and therefore her performance in school, which ultimately becomes a significant factor influencing the health of the family she may have as an adult. When these factors are seen as the interconnected systems and feedback loops that they are, the field of adjacent possibility becomes richer and more complex than it might have seemed previously.

The second factor making Dr. Kauffman's construct so timely is that while our approach to our work is becoming more integrated and holistic, the need for effective action is growing. Across the country, and particularly in the Kellogg Foundation's three priority states of Michigan, Mississippi, and New Mexico, the weak economic recovery is causing states and municipalities to cut essential services to balance their budgets. Proposed cuts to a wide range of services affecting vulnerable children and their families put increased pressure on foundations and the practitioners they support to become even more effective at protecting the interests of these children and families.

In an age of increasing complexity and competition, ensuring a healthier future for our kids and taking advantage of their fully developed talents and skills have vital implications for our social stability and our national economic health and security.

Finally, it seems possible that the field is ripe for movement into adjacent possibilities. That was the clear message of the Monitor Institute's report *What's Next in Philanthropy*, published in July 2010 with support from both the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Speaking to philanthropy overall, Monitor concluded that the coming decade will require all of us to "act bigger" (to more effectively leverage resources and connections) and to "adapt better" (to get smarter, faster).

Writing in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, John Kania and Mark Kramer (2010) make a similar case for foundations to pursue "collective impact." In their description of a more advanced version of interfoundation and intersector collaboration, they envision a long-term social change

process that would expect and thrive on adjacent possibilities, rather than pursue isolated impacts or one-dimensional solutions.

The question for practitioners then becomes: In seeking to secure a healthier future for our kids, into what adjacent possibilities might we move? What kinds of immediate actions and implementations are most likely to produce the most diverse and promising sets of future adjacent possibilities?

A Strategy for the Future

I've been thinking about these questions for some time now, and the Kellogg Foundation has been moving toward some answers since we began work on our strategic framework in 2007.

That framework is itself a good example of a very high-yield "adjacent possible." First we sharpened our focus on vulnerable children. Then we identified our core competencies, as well as our legacies in Food, Health and Well-Being; in Education and Learning; and in Family Economic Security. We then lifted up our two-pronged commitment to work to confront the barriers of structural racism and to promote racial equity, and to unleash the inherent capacity of communities to help themselves. Next we picked three states – Michigan, Mississippi, and New Mexico – in which to concentrate 60 percent of our annual grantmaking over time on an integrated, place-based approach. Finally, we decided to commit at least half of our annual grantmaking (including a portion of the 60 percent devoted to our priority places) to develop integrated programs that build developmental continua and the foundations of lifelong success for children from conception and birth to their completion of third grade, or "zero to eight."

Reorganizing to reflect our new framework and to adapt our integrated strategies into our priority places has opened the door to a range of efforts and possibilities that we hope will have a significant impact on a healthier future for our most vulnerable children.

Empowered Program Managers

For example, we've expanded the role of our program officers. We've given them a new set of guidelines and challenged them to use those guidelines, not only to invest, but to trigger positive change within a community. Doing so drives an entire process of community engagement in which we partner with the community to define its aspirations and the means by which to achieve them.

Effective community engagement alone is an expansion into an adjacent possibility. In many cases, I expect its yield to be a range of second-order possibilities for positive change that are specific to the community in question, and ideally, also relevant to other communities.

A Systematic Approach

Moving from a theory of action to on-the-ground practice requires us to establish an *executional* framework that corresponds to our *strategic* framework. We already have strong, high-level alignment around our key approaches, our place-based focus, and our emphasis on success by the end of third grade.

Our next steps must be to integrate similar alignment in execution throughout the organization. This means connecting strategy directly to tactics. And it requires that we clarify and hone our theories of change for creating a healthier future. To do this, we are now developing a "playbook" that will help us codify and prioritize the ways in which we can expand into the "adjacent possible" in our key places.

The sports metaphor is intentional. Seeing philanthropy as a *team* sport captures our business model of operating in an integrated, multifaceted approach requiring close coordination between our element strategy officers and our place-based officers. Seeing philanthropy as a *contact* sport captures our commitment to work in relationships with all kinds of partners in our places: residents, informal and formal leaders, small grassroots organizations and larger nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), local and state governments, business leaders, and public systems like schools and community health centers.

Finally, the constantly shifting dynamism of a sports contest can be the perfect social metaphor. It captures the spirit of those pursuing adjacent possibilities for positive social change through an adaptive approach that allows for varied kinds and sequences of plays, while still being held accountable for succeeding within the rules and boundaries of the playing field.

A playbook isn't definitive for process, nor is it prescriptive or encyclopedic in addressing every conceivable circumstance. But our playbook does reflect the integrated approach of the strategic framework and our vision of "whole child" development. It does start to provide guidance for the processes by which staff can enter a community, assess the degree of fit with our program criteria, and begin to build the relationships necessary to establish and sustain our work. And it does provide a common tool kit to help determine the content and sequence of core program strategies, depending on circumstances within a given place.

For example, we have worked for several decades on food systems and food issues, and are heartened that so many other funders are taking up this work in both local and national arenas. Over the seasons, we have helped develop some very strong "food plays." Today, with hard-won new provisions in the Child Nutrition Act, the mainstreaming of farm-to-school programs, and new companies like Revolution Foods competing for market share, the school cafeteria has become one of the key arenas for fighting childhood obesity. Now, when our Education and Learning team develops relationships with an elementary school to talk about kindergarten to third-grade literacy and math programs, they will eventually be joined by their Food colleagues who will talk to the same school leaders about the state of the school's food. And their Health and Well Being colleagues will ask about the status of school-based health services and inquire about support for oral health care. Any one of them might ask, "Do any of your second grade teachers use cooking as a way to teach math, vocabulary, and nutrition?"

Triggering Change

Along with our strategic and executional frameworks and our organizational refinement, we're looking at a range of actions and approaches to expand into adjacent possibilities and to ensure that the possibilities we explore and develop offer high potential for yielding significant positive change. At the most fundamental level, we're starting to look at the triggers of social change themselves.

An exciting line of recent reportage – from Malcolm Gladwell's *Tipping Point* to Thaler and Susstein's *Nudge*, from Chip and Dan Heath's *Switch* to Kotler and Lee's *Up and Out of Poverty* – makes it clear that change occurs differently in different contexts and at different times: a community changes differently than a state, and both change differently than a family or an individual. By the same token, organizations and institutions change in different ways than policies do.

And it's the *spark* as well as the *process* of change that vary and that may be subject to influence. Some change might be called "inside-out," triggered by internal experiences, beliefs, motivations, or observations. Other change might be considered "outside-in," triggered by external conditions. (Of course, some changes – like those the paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould called "exaptations" – are effectively sparkless: happy accidents we can't influence.)

This insight opens up a spectrum of adjacent possibilities. I am optimistic that by knowing the optimum target for change in a given area and by being able to refine a constellation of tactics (the new school of behavioral economists is helpful here) in a given sequence, leveraging the appropriate triggers of change for that target can make us far more effective in building a healthier future and creating conditions of success for our children.

Starting at the Beginning

There is understandably tremendous pressure on both government and NGOs to make a difference on behalf of vulnerable children *now*, to get food and health care and better education to kids who need it *today*, to help the parents of vulnerable children find jobs that will help them build a financially stable

and secure future *today.* And those should be, and are, high priorities for many of us.

But it isn't enough simply to catch people when they're falling, nor could we begin to catch all of them even if we chose to do so. The key to the kind of social change that will create a healthier future for our kids, as opposed to a more tolerable present, must be greater attention to the earliest interventions that shape and set a positive life course for a newborn child. Ironically, this is the strategy with the longest lead-time to fruition. But I believe it is also the only strategy that offers the realistic hope of profound and sustainable social change.

Recent research and literature provide ample support for movement in this direction. For example, as Dr. Jack P. Shonkoff, founding director of the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University and chairman of the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, said in describing the council's report, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods* (2000):

> … children are born ready to learn…wired to experience and to master the world around them …(O)ur job is to provide an optimal environment…(T)he quality of the relationships that children have with the important people in their lives…and the interactions…and the feelings that go with those relationships actually influence the emerging architecture of the brain. They sculpt the wiring of the brain. There is no part of the brain…that isn't influenced by these interactions.

The Nobel Prize-winning University of Chicago economist Dr. James Heckman, who has extensively studied early childhood education as an economic development strategy, supports these insights. For example, in a 2005 interview with the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, he cited the findings of the Abecedarian program:

> …an intensive child enrichment program targeted toward disadvantaged children, that starts at 3 or 4 months after the children are born…Lasting substantial differences in IQ are found between those in the program and those not…Thus, if we start early enough and offer enriched environments, we can raise the IQs of disadvantaged children.

To my mind, the primacy of these early interactions on a child's full, healthy development suggests giving very high priority to a wide range of zero-to-eight interventions and implementations that address social and emotional, as well as cognitive, skill development. Even a short list of such interventions would include:

- focusing on healthy mothers and healthy birth outcomes;
- emphasizing first food (mother's milk) and early food experiences that give kids a nutritional and immunological jump-start on life;
- encouraging high-quality, high-frequency parent-child interactions that provide the social, emotional, and cognitive stimulation essential for healthy development;
- encouraging high-quality, high-quantity socially interactive language between parent and child, beginning at birth, providing a solid foundation for later learning and successful interaction;
- developing and providing culturally based early childhood care and education;
- delivering programs that build the social capital and collective efficacy of parents, neighbors, and residents in building community and raising children;
- providing social and economic supports for parents and their aspirations for their children to thrive; and
- creating community-based pathways that guide transitions from infancy to toddlerhood, to preschool experiences, to crossing the schoolhouse threshold.

In short, at the heart of our beliefs on how to break the cycle of poverty and inaugurate a cycle of success for vulnerable children is the overwhelming evidence that it is the quality and quantity of these earliest experiences that most powerfully and fundamentally shape and set the life trajectory for a child at

the beginning of the continuum. And it is that through-line of continuity – from the child who successfully navigates that early part of the continuum, to the adult she becomes, to her future children and *their* children – that can delineate a healthier future for *all* of us. It stands to reason then that the healthiest possible *future* is the one we can facilitate by working to create the healthiest possible *present*, from the moments of conception and birth. Leveraging adjacent possibilities that do so will be a major focus of W.K. Kellogg Foundation work moving forward.