

“Conscious Closure”: stewarding organizations through the cycles of life

by Vanessa Reid

How do we know it is time to bring our work or our organization to completion? And how do we actually go about doing it? What does it mean to steward our organizations through their lifecycles, including the phase of dying, completion, release?

A sustainable system has an inherent ability to shed what is not needed and transform from one form to another in order to continue to evolve. Forests, animals, and even our own families do this seasonally and with every generation. But it seems this natural process is very difficult for organizations. Yet the skillfulness in discerning when it is time to let go - and the collective practice of doing it - is one of the most crucial learning opportunities for our own, and the social sector's, vibrancy and evolution.

Too often endings mean “foreclosure”; they are done quickly, aggressively, without the celebration and acknowledgement of the work, and the people who have contributed. However, when we look at endings as essential to beginnings, dying as a natural phase of ongoing life, indeed as the transformative element for renewal, then we have many choices - and responsibilities - in how we move through such transitions and change.

“What does it mean to be sustainable?”

In December 2007, I was hired as executive publisher of *ascent magazine* & *timeless books*, an award-winning Canadian non-profit publication group based in Montreal, Toronto and BC. At a time of many changes in the publishing world, and the global economy, the Board was asking one question “what does it mean to be sustainable?” They were serious. It was not “how do we keep going?” or “what is our next growth strategy?” but what does it mean to truly evolve into our greatest potential, relevance, service?

The answer we discerned collectively over the course of a year was that we had completed an important cycle of our life as a pioneering magazine of yoga, art, and engaged spirituality. *ascent* is a 40-year old publication. For the last 10 years, it had been published out of Montreal by a group of creative young people, in the form of an international yoga magazine. We saw clearly that the external environment (funding and publishing trends) had an impact on our future. But more importantly, from our internal environment we sensed we had achieved the goals we had set out for ourselves **in this form** of expression - as a magazine. It was time to bring this decade of work to a close, and let come the next stage of life from a place of deep reflection and learning.

In the phase of the lifecycle we were in, sustainability meant bringing our present form to an end. This was a scary realization, and what followed was a period of uncertainty and confusion. In this time, we began to learn how to hold and transform uncertainty.

ascent already had in its organizational DNA two pre-conditions to enhance our ability to work with change, transition, and uncertainty. First, a mature culture of reflection, a skillfulness in the practice of looking inward individually and collectively. Second, an inherent appreciation of living systems and the value of impermanence. Soon we began to look at the work ahead as a kind of collective practice of conscious action. We called our process a “Conscious Closure.”

Right Questions Lead to Right Actions

We began by asking “how do we want to *do* this, how do we want to *be* in this, what do we want to *create* from this?” From this, we framed our Conscious Closure work in two ways 1) as an **organization-wide project** in which everyone is involved and essential and 2) as a **collective learning process** and unique opportunity to learn and practice a specific kind of work.

Critical to our success was a **very clear mandate and detailed Plan** which included our principles, goals and outcomes, a 3-month timeline with a specific end date and a revised budget approved by the Board. Within this, we made the decision to fundraise for and publish a final 10th anniversary issue of *ascent magazine*. This was a very important aspect to cultivating a collective sense of celebration, legacy and completion.

The priority was to work consciously and with great care, in line with the values and culture of our organization. As such, we explicitly worked with **the values of wholeness and integration**. Each individual, role and task, and the organization as a whole would be treated with dignity and integrity. For example, we made a commitment to have the resources to bring our operations to a close as a team and thus planned our time and our budget accordingly. Stated upfront, this created clarity, and generated enthusiasm and solidarity in the team.

Working with Uncertainty and Clarity

The greatest challenge, and most important skill-set that we cultivated, was navigating uncertainty in the stress of completely new work and a short timeline. We noticed that roles, tasks and structure were in constant flux depending on what was needed at that time. The boundaries would solidify only long enough to get the task at hand completed before they would shift again. We decided to create a “minimal-optimal” structure that could adapt to, and hold, the constant change and that combined our values **with** practices of integration and wholeness.

We experimented with forms and structures - for meeting, decision-making and accessing our collective intelligence by:

- forming a **core transition team** to hold the overall process and connect the parts;

- holding frequent and intentional **check ins** for reflection and connection and to surface and include multiple voices;
- paying attention to our **inner landscape** (emotions, mindsets, feelings, competencies, blockages) in order to align with our **outer actions** and **decision-making process**;
- using **practices** such as conversation, meditation, reflection, cooking together and yoga, to **access different kinds of perspectives and intelligence** and to enhance group cohesion and mutual support.

The Big Learning

- Making conscious the need to foresee and steward endings in organizations.
- Learning to listen to *what the work is asking* rather imposing on it what we want or expect.
- Naming and framing and ending can catalyse an immense amount of energy, dynamism and focus. It can literally give new life.
- Shifting the attention of leadership towards the practices of “collective stewardship”: the inspiration to lead in different ways, develop skills and open up ways of thinking in order to steward transitions and endings.
- The importance of understanding how systems learn; creating conditions and skills in organizations to work with and not to resist or hide from the natural processes of lifecycles.
- And lastly, cultivating the patience and ability to hold the paradoxes of celebration and grieving.
- Be courageous.

Vanessa Reid’s leadership focuses on cultivating dynamic cultures and ways of working that tap and nourish the potential of people, organizations and systems to work in extraordinary ways.

Vanessa is a writer, masters of architecture, systems thinker, yoga practitioner, chef and social innovator. Currently based in Jerusalem, she is engaged with “the heart of conflict.” She works translocally with social innovators and change agents in and across Canada, Europe and the Middle East Region bridging, guiding, hosting, coaching, and co-creating the emergence of new practices to move skillfully through their own, their projects’ and community’s transitions and lifecycles.

Previous to publishing [ascent](#) & timeless books, Vanessa was executive director of [Santropol Roulant](#), a Montreal-based innovative non-profit founded by young people, fearless in its integrity, imagination and compassion. She has served on the board of [Community Experience Initiative](#), [Imagine Canada](#), the [YMCA of Greater Montreal](#); is a steward of the [Berkana Exchange](#) and a guardian of [Axladitsa-Ataklavia](#). Follow her work: <http://jerusalemjournals.posterous.com>.