



## **A Manifesto from the Edge**

*To cite*

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*Abstract.*

This essay was written for the first issue of the journal 'Edgy Ideas' and explores a personal relationship with the edge, and with the concept of being edgy. This manifesto claims that the edge is of vital importance as a potentially creative and counter-cultural space. A space that encourages edgy ideas and actions to challenge the dominant narratives, voices and edicts that flow constantly from the centre.

## **A Manifesto from the Edge**

### *Edgy: Dictionary Definition*

At the forefront of a trend; experimental or avant-garde; having an intense or sharp quality.

### *Edgy Associations*

Leading from the edge, cutting edge technology, cliff edge, edgy comments, sharp edges, the outside limit of an object, the place next to a big drop, finding the edge, falling off the edge. Hedge without the H.

### *Edgy Reflections*

The edge locates us in a place of difference. A place where one thing meets another, a place that can be creative, dangerous, comforting, inspiring, mundane. Yet even the mundane can inspire. A sea-shore for example is a place where the edge of land meets the sea, where the edge constantly moves with the tides, it's a place of mundane regularity, yet also a place of constant change and beauty.

For most of my adult life I have been drawn to the edge. In early adult life I found myself a central figure in social circles, 'the soul of the party' and like most adolescents feeling a deep need to belong. Yet whilst feeling comfortable in the centre, I also craved something else that the centre couldn't offer so I began exploring the edge. I would travel alone to distant places, walking in mountains and visiting far away places like the Negev and Sinai deserts. My search was for an edge experience without knowing this was my

search. I stayed with desert monks in monastic settlements and with Bedouin nomads. In England I made a pilgrimage each year with my son to visit the Appleby 'Gypsy' Horse Fair. This temporary gathering took place on the edge of the English wilderness that stretched northwards beyond the reach of urbanisation. Appleby Fair evoked the history and culture of an edge people, a gathering of the traveling Romanies and Irish/English travellers with their piebald horses and beautiful colourful horse-drawn caravans. Camping and sitting around the campfires with these 'despised people of Europe' I felt a belonging - a belonging that resonated with a melancholia, like finding myself through discovering a lost place. In psychoanalysis there is an idea that we organise our lives around very personal 'lost objects', forever trying to fill the gap that is left, usually through some kind of displacement activity. Yet when we stop trying to fill the gap and stop manically trying to replace the lack, we can get in touch with a much deeper sense of self and get close to the real, an unconscious place that cannot be symbolised or named.

To experience a glimpse of 'the real' we have to go to the edge of the gap, to face the loss without trying to run away from it, or replace it. By circling the edge of the abyss, rather than trying to cover it over, we experience the lack and respond with new found desire through which something life-giving and creative emerges.

### *Edge Experiences*

Many years ago I worked as a psychiatric nurse in one of the big victorian mental asylums set on the edge of the city. These asylums were in their last days, soon to be transformed to become luxury flats or supermarkets. These 'mental hospitals' were

communities that offered patients 'asylum' from the madness that those at the centre pretend is sanity. These communities were both safe havens and also very destructive places. They were 'total institutions', which meant that, whilst 'madness' and deviance from normality and was tolerated, there was also a totalising institutional culture that both patients and staff had to conform to. In relation to wider society the asylum at the edge of the city represented a place of fear and a place where 'our madness' was exported and contained. In this sense the asylum, (often called a loony bin or madhouse) was a social construction that marked a clear distinction between sanity and madness. You were either in our sane world, or locked up in their mad world. The walls of the asylum marked the edge of sanity.

This experience of working in an edge community, and of being part of a total institution was both hugely rewarding and very disturbing. It opened me to the realities of working with mental distress, with beautiful sensitive young 'schizophrenic' men being persecuted by haunting voices; with women who obsessively cut themselves. This work demanded walking along the razor thin edge that divides sanity and madness, an edge which moves with time and place, pending on social constructions of what is mad and what isn't. I was sensitized to appreciate the vulnerability and creativity of all people; and learnt how to listen properly - with my ears, eyes and body- to hear what was important for those who couldn't always say things clearly or rationally, yet had so much to share.

The experience of institutionalization also stayed with me, and I became hypersensitive to it. The patients were institutionalized and controlled, being penalized and rewarded

using crude behavioural therapy and medicated if they 'acted out'. Yet what was really shocking was how quickly and the staff became conformed to the total institution.

In future years, working in large public sector institutions and in global corporations, the dangers of institutionalization would unsettle me as I worked in these organisations. In large organisations and corporate life in particular, there is a nuanced transaction that takes place. Accept the salary and conditions and work within a 'constrained freedom' in exchange for aligning personal values and behaviours to fit within the boundaries of company culture. The unspoken rules are clear, you can push limits to the edge, but no further. Conformity and compliance are demanded in exchange for critical freedom and autonomy. Companies offer paradoxical rhetoric: they always value diversity, and always want an aligned homogenous culture. Conformity in these organisational settings is not policed by a Big Other i.e. it is not (often) imposed by an authoritarian boss who demands compliance. It is policed by ourselves and our peers. Catherine Casey refers to 'corporatized selves':

The new corporatization of the self is more than a process of assault, discipline and defeat against which employees defend themselves. It is a process of colonization in which, in its completion, assault and defeat are no longer recognized. Overt displays of employee resistance and opposition are virtually eliminated. Corporatized selves become sufficiently repressed to effectively weaken and dissolve the capacity for serious criticism or dissent.

Casey, C. (1995:p150) *Work, Self, and Society: After Industrialism*. London and New York: Routledge.

*Living by the edge*

I left the cosmopolitan centre (London) to live by the edge (Galway on the west coast of Ireland). It was a conscious move to be inspired from living at the edge.

Where I live the edge is where sea meets land. It is a constantly changing edge, moving daily with the tides, and over the years shifting back and forth with erosion of rocks and displacement of sands. There are sharp cliff edges and softer grassy-sandy edges. These edges mimic our internal world, precarious places, moving places, beautiful and joyful places, wild places, living dynamic places, dangerous places, comforting places.

Within our internal landscapes we have edges. The edges between our conscious and unconscious worlds blur. Internal tides within us can change our emotions and affects, by the minute, hour, day or season. These emotions in turn impact on our relationships with others.

Each day I walk or cycle close to the edge where I live, which is a revitalising force. The Atlantic winds blow in my face awakening me and sharpening my mind. The sea smashing on the rocks sends droplets of water across my face, bringing new life to a tired mind.

I watch wading birds play on the edge which always enchants me. Dancing birds feeding on the gifts from the sea, running back and forth to avoid being engulfed by the sea. Dynamic movement in contrast to the herons who fix themselves in a static pose, waiting to pounce on a fish below the surface. Transitory geese arrive from far away places as migrants mix with the indigenous locals. Swans, egrets and oyster catchers play in the

bay. Sometimes seals and otters come close to the city's edge, swimming into the harbour, fishing for love perhaps. Occasionally I venture to small wild islands just off the edge of the mainland, where I find huge cliff faces buzzing with birdlife, and tiny flowers sheltering in rock crevasses. On the ferry to the islands I look back reflectively at the land's edge that fades from view, and then look expectantly at the edge I am arriving at.

### *Leadership from the edge*

The mythology of leaders creating change from the top and the centre is a well-trodden path in the west. History it is said, is written by victors, and heroic leadership myths are perpetuated by elites (leaders) in power, to extend their hold on power. Yet changes such as democracy didn't come freely from the ruling class or monarchy, but from radical social movements who came from the edge of society. For example in the UK in the 17th Century there were the Diggers, Levellers and other 'seekers' who formed networks of agitators which led to revolution and then to a democratic parliamentary settlement. In the 1650s, on the edge of England in the north west, far away from the intrusive and omnipotent powers of the centre, the radical early Quakers formed small groups that spread virally throughout the UK and later USA. They confronted the joint power of the state and church and demanded the rights of religious freedom, to worship without priests and to marry in their own meeting houses. These were granted to them after much persecution and they influenced religious tolerance in England and later in the USA, through William Penn whose liberal constitution of Pennsylvania state influenced the democratic process in the USA. Leadership from a few at the edge, to the centre of

the western world! This is not to deny the power at the centre and the control of resources, but it is to deny, that this is the only power at work. Where there is power there is resistance, and leadership like power, is not always where we think it is.

### *Epilogue*

I am living with a faith in 'leadership from the edge', a leadership that challenges, subverts, creates and delivers the unexpected.

This magazine Edgy Ideas is part of a wider process of engaging and inspiring new forms of leadership. It is the voice of Analytic-Network Coaching, whose purpose is to '*coach leaders to act in good faith to create the good society*'. Our work is aligned with a multitude of international and local activities which together demonstrate how Edgy Ideas can bring new life and new hope to challenge the tired and weary ideas from the centre.

*Dr Simon Western* [simon@analyticnetwork.com](mailto:simon@analyticnetwork.com) [www.analyticnetwork.com](http://www.analyticnetwork.com)

CEO of Analytic-Network Coaching Ltd  
Curator of Edgy Ideas  
Adjunct Professor University College Dublin  
President Elect International Society for the Psychoanalytic Study of Organizations  
[www.ispso.org](http://www.ispso.org)