

Boxes, Dualisms, and Rhizomes: Reimagining How We Create Together

This piece is adapted from a keynote I gave at the [Cultivating Ensembles](#) Conference in Morristown New Jersey, a wonderful gathering of scientists, researchers, artists, educators, and activists who care deeply about how people come together. I share it as an offer to anyone who is cultivating transformation in any sphere of life.

I've introduced myself in many ways over the years—professor, developmentalist, play activist—but lately, I've been offering something else: I cultivate rhizomes.

What does that mean? Let me back up a bit...

I've loved ensembles since I was twelve years old and went away to sleepaway camp. I loved the cabin groups, the team spirit, the late-night conversations. I didn't know the word "ensemble" then, but I knew what it felt like: belonging, building something together, creating a little world inside the bigger one.

I still love ensembles. I've spent my life building them—in classrooms, in performance workshops, in global communities. But recently I started noticing something:

Ensembles can become boxes too. They can calcify. They can become oasis, cliques or silos or echo chambers. They can forget how to grow.

That's where rhizomes come in.

Rhizomes are a kind of plant that spread horizontally, not vertically. No trunk, no branches. Just shoots, connections, and more shoots. My colleague and mentor [Lois Holzman](#) describes the global [East Side Institute](#) community this way: not a tree, but a rhizome. Messy. Nonlinear. Always growing. Always open.

And when I think about how we might respond to the uncertainty of our time—the boxes and binaries and battles we're trapped in—I don't think we need another slogan or stance. I think we need to grow some rhizomes.

Imagining Beyond Our Boxes

Try this: Wherever you are, close your eyes. Picture someone, somewhere in the world, doing something ordinary or beautiful or hard.

Someone in your neighborhood. A child in Ukraine. A woman in Gaza. A student, a dancer, a fisherman. Someone you love or someone you've never met. What are they doing? Who are they with?

"What did you picture? What was happening? What was that like?"

It's important to recognize that the boxes that divide us were created *by us*—and that means we can create ways to bring ourselves out of our boxes—or at least, imagine that we can, which is a great step out.

But here's the challenge: our world—and our institutions—keep trying to keep us inside those boxes, to prune us back into neat rows. Into either/or thinking. Into dualisms.

But the world—and life itself—is much messier and more interconnected than that.

And yet...

The Hegemony of Dualisms

We're taught to divide the world: good/bad, right/wrong, self/other. Even our earliest questions reinforce it:

- Are you happy or sad?
- Are you sick or healthy?
- Do you love them or not?

As children, we perform entire worlds while playing—monsters and moms in the same scene, impossible combinations made real. But somewhere along the way, we trade invention for preference. We ask: What's your favorite color? What do you want to be?

Dualisms show up everywhere:

- Economic Systems: capitalism or socialism.
- Politics: Liberal or Conservative; Democrat or Republican
- Identity: oppressor or oppressed.
- Even leadership: are you a facilitator or a decision-maker?

They also show up in our activist spaces—where we often ask: are you with us or against us?

Here's the problem: **Dualisms make creativity impossible.** They force us to choose between options, rather than create possibilities. They turn life into a series of stances instead of performances.

Try this: Take two minutes and list as many dualisms as you possibly can (e.g., logic/emotion, structure/freedom).
Pick one.

Now ask yourself: how does this binary limit what you're able to imagine, create, or connect?

These dualisms shape us. But they're not the whole story. In fact, they are the *story* but they are not life—they are not activity....

Human activity is not dualistic. Dualisms lie in how we describe the world, how we see it—but the world, and human life, and the life of this planet, are not dualistic. We don't, it turns out, just love or hate someone, we aren't just happy or sad or even the myriad of other emotional categories. We are not liberal or conservative or radical. But we have learned to see ourselves and each other that way.

And how we see does impact what we can create and who we are willing to create with.

Here's a small, perhaps silly example of an area of life that is not just about making choices that helped me see this as I was preparing this talk: ice cream.

In my lifetime, the number of ice cream flavors and types has exploded. No one says: "Are you chocolate or vanilla?" and leaves it there. Instead, we remix—mint chip, dulce de leche with pretzels, mango swirl, blueberry-lavender. New flavors emerge constantly.

We don't relate to ice cream as a fixed either/or. We see it as something we can endlessly invent with.

So why can't we do that with economies? Or with identities? Or relationships?

We are continuously inventing.

What if economic systems were like that? Or types of relationships? Or political solutions?

Think of something in your life that might be transformed if you and others related to it non-dualistically.

OK, so how do we do that—what does it take to move beyond dualistic thinking? Well, I have some offers today that I hope will help us. These are provocations/invitations that Lois has been inviting us to play with (and give away) at the [East Side Institute](#) to support our rhizomatic activity.

Provocation 1: There Is No WHAT Without a HOW

Dualisms are obsessed with WHAT:

- What do you believe?
- What side are you on?

- What's the right answer?

But real transformation doesn't live in the WHAT. It lives in the HOW.

There is no WHAT without a HOW

The same WHAT—like justice, or freedom, or equality—can produce vastly different worlds depending on HOW it's created—in fact the only way to have a what is with and through how. But we become alienated from that...

When we focus on HOW, the binary begins to dissolve. New creative paths emerge. We move from opposition to performance.

Take jazz bands, for example.

The "WHAT" is the song.

But the music is created in the "HOW."

- How they listen to each other.
- How they improvise.
- How they play off one another's riffs.

Jazz bands don't just play notes—they perform relationships.

This is true in communities, too. Let me share an example from the Institute's rhizomatic activity

[**Creating Our Mental Health \(COMH\)**](#) is a performance-based, community-building practice in which people create emotional well-being together rather than receive "mental health services." Rooted in social therapeutics, COMH gathers an ever-shifting

mix of neighbors, elders, youth, health workers, artists, and clinicians to co-create the group itself—the “our” is literal.

Dr. Jessie Fields and COMH group

Poetry, music, improv, and playful conversation are used as shared materials; participants echo one another’s names, gestures, and feelings, build collective poems, perform life moments, and make meaning across differences. The facilitators (physician, psychiatrist, social worker, improv artist, community organizer) lead by stepping back and inviting everyone to build with “whatever we have,” demystifying expertise and stigma while shifting authority to the group. People show up for one another; responsibility, risk-taking, and emotional growth become social, not individual, achievements.

Born in New York City and now spreading rhizomatically—online, in Harlem food pantries, churches, clubhouses, public housing sites, and with young women in rural Uganda—COMH keeps transforming to fit local cultures while sustaining a global conversation.

Participants say it’s affirming, non-clinical, and developmental; many leave trying new activities, supporting others, and bringing poetry and play back to their communities. We don’t treat illness—we create our mental health together.

Rhizomes don’t know WHAT they’re growing toward. They don’t even know how to do it. They create the HOW as they go. This leads to our second provocation:

Provocation 2: Don’t Get Trapped by Knowing

This is extremely challenging—because we live in a world where knowing determines doing.

We think we need to know how before we can move forward.

But imagine if babies had to know how to walk before they tried. Before they spoke. Before they built relationships with us. We’d never develop!

Not knowing *can* feel paralyzing—but it can also be the gateway to creativity.

What I mean by not knowing is embracing unknowability.

It doesn't eliminate knowledge or information—but it changes our relationship to moving forward.

In my university courses, I invite students to “perform a new version” of themselves as learners. Some sit up straighter. Others ask a question. Some stay silent for the first time. Small changes. Big discoveries. They begin to see themselves as creators of who they are—not just knowers of who they are.

Rhizomes don't “know” where they're going. They keep growing, exploring, staying open to the unexpected.

Provocation 3: There Is Nothing We Can't Play With

Playing with Mud

Play is the most powerful activity we have to challenge our commitment to knowing. Play is HOW incarnate.

When we play, we:

- Let go of what is.
- Relate as who we are *and* who we're becoming.
- Create something new from what already exists.

Play isn't just for children. It's a political act. A way to explore the unthinkable. A tool for staying human.

Here are two examples that remind us: we can play with *anything*.

[Operation Conversation: Cops and Kids](#) is a performance-based program where Black and Latinx teens and NYPD officers come together—not to resolve conflict, but to play. Literally. In a community room or school gym, they form a circle and begin with slow-motion movement, echoing each other's gestures. They make up improv scenes about choosing a pet, where anyone can be the parent or the child. And they play with, try out, what it's like to talk to each other as human beings about being a teenager stopped on

the street, what it's like to be a cop in uniform. Nothing is solved. No one is "fixed." But something is created.

Operation Conversation: Cops and Kids

They create an ensemble that makes it possible to relate in ways that aren't defined by fear or authority. They get curious. They listen differently. They discover the creative capacity to see beyond the dualisms of "cop" and "kid," "authority" and "suspect."

[The Parents Circle](#) – Families Forum: 800+ bereaved Palestinians and Israelis—people who've lost immediate family members to violence—come together not to agree, but to create.

They tell stories. They cry, argue, make art. They visit schools. They build with their grief rather than weaponize it.

This is play at its most radical: not escapism, but creation in the rubble. Not ignoring pain, but choosing to remain in relationship across it.

None of this is easy. But play creates a space where the unimaginable can start to take shape.

Try This: Playing With the Unplayable

What's something in your life—or in the world—that feels "unplayable"?

A conversation. A political issue. A wound. A fear.

Now ask: What might it look like to play with it—even gently?

Can you perform a different relationship to it—through art, gesture, silence, invention?

Play doesn't fix. But it cracks things open. It finds new pathways, even through the hardest ground.

That's what rhizomes do.

Cultivate Rhizomes, Not Just Ensembles

Ensembles are beautiful—but they can become boxes.

Rhizomes remind us that the space between matters. That relationships don't just hold us—they make us. That movement and messiness are the ground of creativity.

So please take these provocations as an offer, an invitation to create...with others

- ◆ There is no WHAT without a HOW
- ◆ Don't get trapped by KNOWING
- ◆ There is NOTHING we cannot play with

Keep sending out shoots in unexpected directions. Keep connecting with others across boundaries. Keep imagining your way out of the boxes—even if we can't fully leave them.

Because the world doesn't just need our outrage and our protests. It needs our playful courage to create new worlds—even in the midst of the old.

Let's keep rewriting the script—even as the stage collapses.

Let's play. Together.