

## FELLOW NOTES

# LIFTING SOCIETY THROUGH OPPORTUNITY EMERGENCE

*“I am therefore motivated by the question: What if we could have the public utilities of innovation; and what would they look like? How does this question relate to the Ethics and Leadership Initiative of The Wheatley Institution?”*

Ronald K. Mitchell | April 15, 2015 | [Printer](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Google+](#) | [Twitter](#) | [LinkedIn](#) | [Email](#)



It was the late 1960's, and I was a teenager. I played piano and organ in a successful dance band every weekend. And I learned a lot. In particular there was one thing I learned that had a profound impact on my future career, although at the time I never would have guessed. I learned to “keep the walkway clear.” Now, what does that have to do with a dance band? Well, as part of the set-up for our sound equipment, I quickly learned to “keep the stage clear” so that there were fewer obstacles to overcome in setting up for the performance; and therefore, fewer obstacles to delivering a high-value show. Minimizing

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Prior to graduate school, as a CPA and executive, I tried to take on “value-obstacle removal” in a variety of business and civic settings. In each case I observed that in almost all socio-economic relationships there is inherent value that goes undetected and therefore unrealized – simply because there are obstacles that impede value emergence in value-creating relationships. On a case-by-case basis, I found repeatedly that when such obstacles were removed, that the inherent new value in fact emerged. So when in graduate school I received formal training as a social scientist, it was only natural that I would seek to understand the underlying forces that play a part in removing obstacles to the emergence of new value.

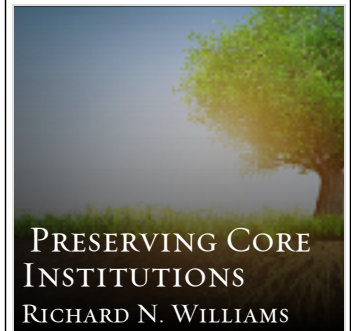
My continuing scholarly study has therefore centered on the problems (obstacles) and possibilities in opportunity emergence, and it focuses on better understanding the core systems and institutions that enable greater human capacity and liberty by identifying and removing those obstacles. As a result, I conduct research at the intersection of stakeholder theory and social welfare; and I am also working a project for the development of (what I am now calling) the “public utilities” of innovation.

Stakeholder theory, for example, is an inclusive approach to the human relationships

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that relate to organizations. By “theory” I mean a succinct explanation of “what happens and why,” in the same sense that Clayton Christensen uses the term in his book *How Will You Measure Your Life*. Stakeholder theory suggests that organizations influence and are influenced by a wide variety of people and entities. One of the specific projects that I’ve been working on seeks to offer a better framework for accounting for all stakeholders’ contributions and costs – so as to be more fully inclusive.

Another compelling search that I believe warrants our consideration (and to which I am now turning more of my attention) is to better identify the underlying systems that create and sustain the institutions of innovation in society. My premise for being so interested, is the idea that – just like building houses without readily available public utilities such as electricity, gas, roads, sewer, and water – the process of organizing to create new value through innovation is presently far too idiosyncratic (one trial and error at a time). I reason that were we to have such public utilities of innovation readily available, we could expect that the three key obstacles to opportunity emergence that I have identified in my research (information problems, trust problems, and invention problems) could be reduced, and new value would emerge. I am therefore motivated by the question: What if we could have the public utilities of innovation; and what would they look like?

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How does this question relate to the Ethics and Leadership Initiative of The Wheatley Institution? My sense is that in the identification and removal of the obstacles to opportunity emergence we will be enabled as people to offer leadership that lifts society and that strengthens our core institutions. As one example, I recently – out of curiosity – engaged with a few graduate students in examining the correlation between GDP per capita by country; and the Corruption Perceptions Index (the extent to which public power is used for private gain) by country. In our computations, that correlation exceeded 70%, which to me indicates that these two indicators co-vary substantively. So, I reason: to the extent that the obstacles to opportunity emergence, such as corruption, can be reduced through better stakeholder management, or through globally-available “utilities” that build the institutions of innovation, then the kind of leadership envisioned in the Charter of the

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Wheatley Institution can be initiated, preserved, and supported.

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