

Inner Transformation

Reading Time: 10-12 minutes

“As human beings, our greatness lies not so much in being able to remake the world as in being able to remake ourselves.” – Mahatma Gandhi

“We but mirror the world. All the tendencies present in the outer world are to be found in the world of our body. If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a man changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards him. This is the divine mystery supreme. A wonderful thing it is and the source of our happiness. We need not wait to see what others do.” — Mahatma Gandhi

Our journey towards ecosocial literacy and ecosocial (or transformative) leadership is grounded in the principle that the changes and conditions for change we wish to create in the world will be reflective of the changes and conditions we cultivate in ourselves. The transformation we’re referring to is about “becoming the change we wish to see in the world” (to use a common expression). Even as we’re working to transform the systems and situations of our outer world, we recognize that the critical transformation happens inside each one of us.

Transformative education^[1] is essentially a reflective, contemplative journey that includes dialogue and sharing our experiences and discoveries with a group of trusted travelers. In that journey, lies the possibility of *altering, remaking* or *re-imagining* ourselves from the inside out. While something definitely rearranges or transmogrifies, it’s something inside of us, not necessarily visible to the world. In broad terms, the transformation is an inner one of perspective, mindset and orientation, which usually involves the shift from a more ego-centric to a more eco-centric point of view.

“Transformative education is defined as those educational practices...that foster deep engagement with and reflection on our taken-for-granted ways of viewing the world, resulting in fundamental shifts in how we see and understand ourselves and our relationship with the world.” - from the Journal of Transformative Education

This transformation is a possibility, not a given, and it happens by itself through sincere, heartfelt consideration of new ideas, reflection, dialogue and unconditional listening to others. When we say it happens by itself, we mean it happens intrinsically, naturally and without force. We don’t work to make something specific happen; rather, we wholeheartedly engage ourselves with specific new routines, ideas and ways of interacting with others. Throughout this engagement, we may have realizations and ‘aha’ moments; for example, a challenge to part of our world view, an expansion of our awareness or understanding, or some creative insight. These experiences open us to new possibilities, and through sharing those auspicious moments with supportive peers and mentors, we build and develop new ways of being and we gain confidence in our inner experiences. These new ways of being oftentimes include increased empathy and concern for the well-being of others, increased motivation or energy in our body and an increased ability to be present for others, listen

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deeply to them and view things from their perspective. These changes may inspire us to seek deeper meaning in our lives and develop relevant service to others and future generations, all of which are hallmarks of deeper connection and growing leadership capacity.

The idea of “becoming the change” works nicely as an internet meme or activist slogan, but with any attempt to actually do it, we soon discover it isn’t as simple as it sounds. For example, we may all believe that we’re peaceful, but when challenged with a difficult situation, how well are we able to remain in that peaceful state or remain open to another’s point of view? For most of us, to remain peaceful regardless of our outer circumstances requires an inner transformation of some kind. It requires a transformation from our mentality of confrontation, winning and being right to a mentality of interconnectedness, sharing and openness. As we begin, what we’re seeking to transform first is ourselves. As our inner peace becomes more unshakeable, we have a much better chance of experiencing and manifesting peace in the outer world. From that place, we have more insight into the kinds of actions we can take to help transform the world around us into a more beautiful, just, sustainable and peaceful place. From that transformed mentality of peace and openness, we can begin to imagine the kinds of projects we might undertake that will foster this change in the external world, both in others and in the dysfunctional systems we currently take for granted. This sort of transformation doesn’t involve force, as in using our willpower to make ourselves be different. It comes from allowing different routines, perspectives and points of view to slowly seep into our hearts and accomplish their alchemy.

“I’ve always been very concerned with democracy. If you can’t imagine you could be wrong, what’s the point of democracy? And if you can’t imagine how or why others think differently, then how could you tolerate democracy?” — Warren Berger

Allowing ourselves to be changed — this is at the heart of the transformative process. We cannot “become the change” if we’re unwilling or unable to let go of old patterns of thinking or ways of viewing the world. There is a sort of death involved — a death of our old selves. We have to be open to the transformation — it’s the caterpillar/butterfly story. We must let go of the old self we were and become a new person, so to speak. What guides us through this process? Just as a monarch caterpillar has a set of ancient instructions to follow, we too can draw upon our ancient human lineage and our capacity and predilection for interconnection, just and peaceful community, co-creativity and service. We allow ourselves to be guided by a new set of values, a new perspective, a connection to our gifts, a connection to our gratitude, the excitement of serving life and beauty, regardless of where that seems to take us. Essentially, we allow ourselves to be an instrument of the cosmos, just like the first cells to harness the energy of the sun through photosynthesis — they too were in service to life and beauty. When they first created photosynthesis, they didn’t know they would eventually transform into humans, grizzly bears and the James Webb telescope, but because of their incredible creativity and persistence through billions of years, here we all are. We don’t know what will come after us, but when we align with the forces and values of

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the universe, we can trust the creative potential of a 14 billion year cosmogenesis of which we are an integral part.

As our inner transformation deepens, we bring all of our gifts to bear in our lives. We gradually leave behind the mindsets that keep us tethered to separation, extraction, overconsumption and rampant consumerism, and embrace the community of life of which we've always been a part. We're rehabilitating our society away from the normalcy of disconnection to the inherent human nature of interconnection. The smallest unit of this transformation is deep, reverent listening, without judgement or trying to change one another. We're learning to listen from a place of curiosity and from the future that is wanting to emerge from our shared conversations. This deep listening blossoms into mentoring, into co-creative connection and coaching, and into generative, presence-based action.

This transformation isn't so much about simply adopting a new set of operating principles, though it may include that along the way. It's more about connecting deeply to our own enchantment and fascination and our reverence for the Earth community. We integrate that with our innate desire to contribute to a more beautiful world and allow all that to guide our direction. We allow ourselves to slowly break free from the stranglehold of our separation mentality, our modern economic system and all the patterns of thinking that come with it. We begin to trust our non-cognitive sense of ourselves and the magic and miracle of the unfolding, breathtaking Earth and the universe of which we are an integral part.

Enchantment, fascination, wonder and awe are part of our natural human lineage. They are part of what makes us fully human. When we give them a regular place in our daily lives, they will change us. This sort of natural transformation occurs simply by allowing ourselves to become more fully human. It comes from honoring the outrageous, mysterious gift of life that we were given, that we did nothing to earn and that we paid nothing for. The natural gratitude that arises from having received such a monumental gift then flows back into the universe in the form of our actions, thoughts and our own creative generosity. Conceivably, we could do this in ways that have nothing to do with our dominant economic model of money, growth, extraction and consumerism. In other words, our generosity spills over into the world without regard to whether or not we "get something" for it. We already received the gift of life! It is based on the ongoing awareness of the generosity that is built into the universe, into Earth herself, and into our ancestors the fish, the vertebrates, the apes and the entire *hominin* lineage.

Transformation of this sort happens in its own time. It cannot be forced or coerced, only tended, supported and witnessed. We can no more force ourselves to transform as we can force another to change. What we can do is try to create the conditions, the daily habits, the mindsets, the practices, that will set our transformation in motion and make it inevitable. And even then, we let go of time frames, specific outcomes or timely fruition. The transformation into a global species, peaceful and just, with full awareness of our impact upon and place within the family of the planet is epic. Humans have never before been called to this level of creativity and transformation. Earth itself and our presence here wasn't created in a

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generation or two. It may take many more generations for humans to accomplish the task that we have set before ourselves. We need only take our own small steps, in those ways to which we're called. Not so much because we wish to "change the world", but so that we can change ourselves to become an instrument for the world. As photographer Dewitt Jones says, "Not to become the best *in* the world, but to become the best *for* the world."

"To make this work we need to transform our education and lifelong learning systems. While we have evolved from rote to more learner-centric modalities in many places, education continues to focus on individual learning and capacity building. We are a far cry from educational models that build the capacity for co-sensing and co-shaping the future." — Otto Scharmer, Senior Lecturer, MIT

Changing our educational systems from output or testing driven to the actual generators of a more ecologically and socially just, peaceful future is no small task. We are creating new types of societal learning infrastructures built from the ground up for transformation. These are infrastructures that connect to and activate our human capacity for individual and collective transformation. We're building connective, supportive environments — outer environments that are favorable to inner transformation. As educators, mentors and facilitators, we also recognize that the "how is the what." How we teach and how we conduct our classes becomes as much the what as the content areas we teach. We must model and embody the principles and practices of transformation and of a more beautiful future, even as we're working to transform ourselves. It happens one conversation, one journal entry, one reflection, one courageous deep listening moment at a time.

Notes

[1] "Transformative learning theory describes the processes a person undergoes when they irreversibly transform the way they "experience, conceptualize, and interact with the world" (Hoggan, 2016, p. 71). It stems from Mezirow's (1991) theory of perspective transformation where a person transforms their frame of reference, and in doing so comes to see the world differently. Many proponents argue that transformative learning...can support a person in living a life that is authentic to their values and beliefs rather than living by the values adopted blindly through socialization (Kegan, 2000; Mezirow, 1991)."From *Considering Transformative Learning for Adolescents Enrolled at Semester Schools* by Lisa Meerts-Brandtsma and Jim Sibthorp. *Journal of Transformative Education*, Vol. 19, Issue 1. July 19, 2020.