

Activating Hope in the Midst of Crisis: Emotions, Transformative Learning, and “The Work that Reconnects”

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Abstract

Joanna Macy’s “Work that Reconnects” (WTR) is a transformative learning process that endeavors to help participants acknowledge, experience, and understand the emotions that may either empower or inhibit action to address the ecological crisis. The WTR seeks to work through grief, fear, and despair to animate a sense of active, empowering hope rooted in gratitude, compassion, imagination, community, and collective action. Drawing on theoretical perspectives from neuroscience, ecopsychology, and transformative learning, this paper analyzes how emotions may either impede or facilitate active engagement in ecological issues. The assumptions, goals, and process of the WTR are then presented in light of these insights. Finally, a case study involving the use of the WTR with young adults along with their reflections on the experience are considered to illustrate how the process may be employed as well as to analyze some of the benefits, challenges, and limitations of using this transformative learning process.

Keywords

transformative learning, social transformation, experiential learning, environmental education

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Humanity is now facing a grave ecological crisis including rapid climate change, ocean acidification, and the mass extinction of species. Analyzing these and other perils, Ehrlich & Ehrlich (2013) conclude that human civilization (and many ecosystems) may collapse unless concerted action is taken to resolve the most serious threats. Yet, simply presenting scientific information about the crisis “does not ordinarily produce rapid changes in institutional or individual behaviour” (p. 5). While political and economic factors play a significant role in impeding effective action, emotional dynamics also come into play. What happens, for example, when a situation is so threatening that presenting more information simply produces distress, making people feel overwhelmed or powerless? Joanna Macy (1995, p. 241) points out that, “until the late twentieth century, every generation throughout history lived with the tacit certainty that there would be generations to follow.” Given the severity of the ecological crisis, such certainty no longer exists. This may constitute a kind of collective disorienting dilemma, which Macy (2007) describes as the “pivotal psychological reality of our time” (p. 151). Given these circumstances, attempting to shock people with facts may lead to greater resistance and defensiveness (Macy & Johnstone, 2012). The pain experienced when contemplating life-threatening situations can give rise to grief, guilt, fear, anger, and even dread (Fisher, 2002). When “full awareness hurts,” we may seek to numb psychic distress by “turning down the volume” instead of taking action (Sewall, 1995, p. 202). “The very danger signals that should rivet our attention, summon up the blood, and bond us in collective action” instead “make us want to pull down the blinds and busy ourselves with other things” (Macy & Brown, 1998, p. 26). Denial blinds us to the gravity of the crisis while emotional paralysis inhibits the actions needed to address pressing problems; both may actually help perpetuate destructive habits and systems.

In response to this dilemma, Joanna Macy has developed an adult transformative learning process called the “Work that Reconnects” (WTR) which endeavors to move participants from emotional defensiveness or paralysis to a stance marked by a realistic, active hope that serves to motivate action. Drawing on insights from deep ecology, systems theory, ecopsychology, Buddhism, and political activism, the WTR assumes that understanding and working with our emotional response to pressing problems is essential to empowering transformative action. While blocked or repressed emotions impede our ability to respond, experiencing and refocusing emotions may serve as a source of energy to bring about change (Johnstone, 2002). Through a four-step process employing meditations, interactive exercises, and conceptual insights, the WTR helps participants to experience, acknowledge, and understand their emotional response to the state of the world. It also engages the imagination to broaden a sense of connection and compassion with other humans and living beings – not only those living now, but also those who have come before us and those who will follow. At the heart of this learning is a shift in perspective – what Macy calls “seeing with new eyes” – which builds a sense of personal power enabling participants to respond more fruitfully to the pressing challenges of our time.

This article explores perspectives that illuminate the learning challenges – particularly from a more psychological perspective – posed by the ecological crisis, drawing on transformative learning theory, neuroscience, and ecopsychology. The assumptions, principles, and process of the WTR are then described and analyzed in light of these insights. Finally, a concrete example of using the WTR in a workshop with young adults is presented along with reflections written by the participants that highlight some benefits and challenges of employing this transformative learning methodology.

Transformative Learning, Emotions, and the Ecological Crisis

The Work that Reconnects can be understood as a process of transformative learning which – instead of simply seeking to integrate new knowledge or skills into the learner’s current perspective – endeavors to draw insights out of the learner’s experience to stimulate a shift in perspective and empower action. For Mezirow (1997, p. 5), transformative learning entails “a change in a *frame of reference*.” These frames include “associations, concepts, values,” emotions and “conditioned responses” that combine to create our “habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and acting” (pp. 5-6). Together, these enable us to make sense of experience and find meaning. Mezirow (1994) also speaks of transformative learning in terms of changing our “meaning perspectives,” the predispositions flowing out of psycho-cultural assumptions that shape and delimit sensations and perceptions; essentially, these are a “personal paradigm for understanding ourselves and our relationships” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 101). When situations arise that cannot be adequately understood or addressed within our existing frame of reference, this may spur us to shift towards a new, more inclusive, permeable, differentiating, and integrative perspective. Such situations are referred to as “disorienting dilemmas” and may take the form of triggering incidents that catalyze a deep examination of one’s personal assumptions and problem-solving approaches (Mezirow, 1994). Yet, as Baumgartner (2001) notes, such dilemmas do not always take the form of a single, dramatic event but may rather result from the accumulation of a number of smaller incidents that converge to initiate a transformative process.

Could the ecological crisis itself be considered, in some sense, to be a disorienting dilemma? While the dominant assumption of capitalist industrial societies has been that ever increasing consumption, economic growth, and resource extraction would result in wealth and well-being for all, the ecological crisis calls these assumptions into question by demonstrating that our current path is not sustainable. Simply continuing “business as usual” may result in the collapse of both human civilization and the ecosystems upon which Earth’s life depends. Theodore Roszak (1992, p. 232), the cultural historian who founded ecopsychology, affirms that this crisis cannot be understood as simply “a random catalogue of mistakes, miscalculations, and false starts that can easily be made good with a bit more expertise in the right places.” To resolve the current crisis, “nothing less than an altered sensibility is needed, a radically new standard of sanity that... uproots the fundamental assumptions

of industrial life.” In other words, the collective frame of reference that has guided modern industrial societies needs to change.

While the ecological crisis may have spurred some sectors of society to reexamine fundamental assumptions and adopt more ecological frames of reference, most people have arguably not yet moved to a significantly more ecological perspective. Beyond the systemic impediments to transformation (i.e. the economic interests that benefit from maintaining the status quo, including the ongoing consumption of fossil fuels), psychological factors also come into play. Indeed, Taylor (1997) notes that disorienting dilemmas do not always lead to transformative learning. To understand why, he suggests it may be necessary to move beyond Mezirow’s initial reliance on rational, critical thinking to analyze the role of emotions, intuition, empathy, and other forms of knowing might play. Mezirow (2000) himself notes that disorienting dilemmas are often accompanied by feelings of fear, anger, shame, or guilt. Yet these feelings, if particularly strong, may *impede* transformation. Because of this, disorienting dilemmas provoked by the ecological crisis – a human-induced crisis which threatens the very survival of future generations – may elicit responses such as denial, despair, and attempts to distract ourselves from painful realities rather than spurring perspective transformation and action.

Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio’s somatic marker hypothesis asserts that “individuals make judgements not only by assessing the severity of outcomes and their probability of occurrence, but also and primarily in terms of their emotional quality” (Bechara, Damasio, & Damasio, 2000, p. 305). Damasio’s (1994b) research on individuals suffering from frontal lobe damage indicates that, while our decision-making ability depends on emotions, in certain cases emotions can also “be pernicious to rational decision-making” and may actually create “an overriding bias against objective facts” (p. 191). When considering complex, threatening global issues like population growth, climate change, or nuclear armaments, emotions may obscure the reality of the situation, resulting in a kind of “myopia for the future” where longer-term consequences are neglected in favor of immediate gratification (Damasio, 1994a).

As Milton (2008) observes, Damasio essentially affirms that “people act in order to feel better” (p. 75). Therefore, attempts to motivate action using shock, fear, or guilt are particularly problematic. From an evolutionary perspective, fear’s primary purpose is to motivate escape from danger by either fleeing or fighting. Yet, when dealing with complex issues like climate change, fleeing is seldom a realistic option (save in the psychological sense through denial, repression, or distraction). Fighting may be more appropriate, but it is difficult for individuals to adequately address large-scale problems with complex causes. In such cases, the easiest way to “feel better” may simply be to manage one’s internal emotions. Fear may briefly gain our attention, but it is difficult (and unpleasant) to sustain it for any length of time. Instead of motivating action, fear can therefore have the opposite effect. Indeed, a study by O’Neill & Nicholson-Cole (2009) which attempted to motivate action on climate change by employing shocking images found that while these representations “appear to be memorable and may initially attract individuals’ attention,” they also

tend to “distance and disempower individuals in terms of their sense of personal engagement with the issue” (pp. 374-5). Over time, the use of “shock and awe” tactics undermines trust (impeding collective action) and may produce unintended reactions such as denial, apathy, and skepticism. While facts need to be presented clearly and at times forcefully, approaches that enable persons to relate positively to both the causes and consequences of a problem are likely to be more successful, particularly if they enable individuals to perceive the issue’s relevance “for their locality and life” and help them to find “ways in which they (and others) can positively respond” (O’Neill & Nicholson-Cole, 2009, p. 376).

Roszak (1995) criticized environmentalists for using fear, guilt, or shame to motivate ecological action. Shame, in particular, has always “been among the most unpredictable motivations in politics; it too easily slides into resentment. Call someone’s entire way of life into question, and what you are apt to produce is defensive rigidity” (pp. 15-16). Ultimately, shame undermines trust – including our trust in ourselves – as well as the solidarity needed for effective transformative action.

Recalling Mezirow’s observations, disorienting dilemmas are often accompanied by feelings of fear, guilt, and shame. Certainly, confronted with the ecological crisis, such feelings – and even dread – are natural and understandable; however, in the case of questions that pose an existential threat to survival, it would be an error to attempt to *use* fear, guilt, or shame as a motivating force. Not only may these distance, disempower, and undermine solidarity, they can actually push people into outright denial.

Macy notes that denial often begins as simple disbelief. We may try to ignore the problem, particularly if it unfolds gradually over time (like rising temperatures) or is difficult to perceive (like ocean acidification). Once a problem becomes more apparent, the next response may be to dispute the facts, argue that the problem is not so severe, or assert that human ingenuity will magically resolve the problem in the future. (When considering ecological issues such as climate change, the phenomena of disbelief and dispute is often reinforced by mass-media and lobby groups seeking to impede actions that would reduce the consumption of fossil fuels as well as the profits of those producing them.) Finally, once ignoring or debating the problem becomes impossible, we may retreat into a kind of “double life” in which we tuck awareness of the crisis into a hidden corner of the mind, living “our lives as if nothing has changed, while knowing that everything has changed” (Macy, 1995, p. 243). Yet, this repression comes at a high price since psychic numbing disconnects us from the very sources of energy that could serve to drive transformative action. The sense of isolation or cognitive confusion that may arise as a result “converge to produce a sense of futility. Each act of denial, conscious or unconscious, is an abdication of our powers to respond” (Macy, 1983, p. 16). Instead of appealing to guilt, fear, or shame – which tend to provoke denial, disconnection, apathy, and paralysis – Macy asserts that we need to acknowledge our pain and understand its source; we feel pain because

we care and because we are connected with the entire community of life. This connection in itself is a key source of transformative power.

Simultaneously, we may draw on emotions that foster a sense of connection such as awe, gratitude, and love to motivate action. Edward Wilson (1984) affirms that humans share a deep emotional bond to Earth which he calls “biophilia” – the “urge to affiliate with other forms of life” (p. 85). The community of life is itself “the matrix in which the human mind originated and is permanently rooted” (p. 139), an idea echoed as well in the writings of Thomas Berry (1988). Ecopsychologists similarly speak of the “ecological unconscious” as the core of the psyche and the “compacted ecological intelligence of our species, the source from which culture unfolds as the self-conscious reflection of nature’s own steadily emerging mindlikeness” (Roszak, 1992, p. 304). From this perspective, reawakening to biophilia, our psychic connection to all of Earth’s living beings, is the key to healing ourselves and motivating collective action. Indeed, several quantitative studies demonstrate that people who experience a strong sense of connection with nature are more likely to support pro-ecological political action and adopt sustainable lifestyles (Hedlund-de Witt, de Boer, & Boersema, 2014; Mayer & Frantz, 2004; Nisbet, Zelenski, & Murphy, 2009).

All of these insights illuminate ways to facilitate transformative learning in the face of the challenges posed by the ecological crisis. Mezirow’s (1997) initial emphasis on developing critical, autonomous thinkers may underestimate the role that emotions, imagination, and embodiment play in transformative learning (Kovan & Dirkx, 2003). Indeed, Lakoff and Johnson (1999) affirm that meaning-making is an integral process involving our bodies, emotions, and imaginations. Moreover, transformative learning may actually need to emphasize strengthening our interconnection with one another (cultivating solidarity to facilitate collective action) and with the greater community of life (motivating and sustaining the struggle for sustainability via biophilia) rather than on developing autonomy.

These perspectives are reflected in O’Sullivan’s (2002) understanding of transformative learning as “a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions” which “dramatically and irreversibly alters our way of being in the world.” This process affects both our relationship with other human beings and the greater Earth community, including “our understanding of relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race and gender; our body awarenesses, our visions of alternative approaches to living; and our sense of possibilities for social justice and peace and personal joy” (p. 11). While this understanding of integral transformative learning still values critical reflection and dialogue, it does not privilege discursive rationality (Morrell & O’Connor, 2002). Instead, it understands that learning can occur non-verbally (through the body or emotions) and involves both personal and social change. Applied to environmental education, O’Sullivan and Taylor (2004) conceive transformative learning as a “learning toward an ecological consciousness” (p. 11) that enables learners to move beyond “the despair of our current condition,” “create an expansive, life-giving vision” that engages the

human spirit, and foster ecological values such as connection, generosity, partnership, and celebration” (p. 3). The transformation to an ecological consciousness will ultimately involve a discovery (or recovery) of an expanded, ecological sense of self as well as a vital awareness of relationships and process.

The WTR as Ecological Transformative Learning

The Work that Reconnects provides a concrete process for integral transformative learning towards an ecological consciousness that may be used in courses, workshops, or retreats ranging from a few hours to several weeks in duration. The process is often visualized as a cyclical spiral with four stages (see Figure 1, next page) that seek to move participants “from an emotionally defensive or frozen stance” towards an active, productive engagement “with the almost inconceivably large and messy problems we live among” (Bradbury, 2003). The learning process begins – not with guilt, fear, or shame – but rather **gratitude**, enabling learners to root themselves in their experiences of awe, beauty, and goodness in the world which includes relationships with other people and the greater Earth community; this enables participants to perceive their connection with the living world as well as a sense of biophilia. Only then does the process move on to that of **honoring our pain for the world**; yet, even here, the point is not to motivate through guilt but rather to enable participants to experience feelings such as fear, grief, anger, emptiness, and despair in a supportive setting and to examine the roots of suffering. In particular, pain is reframed as a consequence of feeling connected with others through bonds of compassion. While these bonds may cause us to suffer, they can also be understood as a key motivation for transformative action. At the same time, sharing these feelings builds community and a sense of mutual support. From here, the process proceeds to **seeing with new eyes** where insights from systems theory help facilitate a shift in perspective (or frame of reference) towards a more relational worldview in which power is understood – not as the ability to impose authority – but rather as a “power-with” resulting from working with others. As well, exercises that enable learners to connect emotionally to both their ancestors and future generations (human and non-human) expand participants’ sense of time and sense of responsibility. Finally, in **going forth**, learners are challenged and empowered to embody their shifts in perception and understanding through concrete actions and an ongoing commitment to work for a more just, sustainable, and fulfilling world (Macy & Brown, 1998; Macy & Johnstone, 2012).

The WTR is framed against the backdrop of three stories – essentially different characterizations of our current reality. The first, “Business as Usual,” sees no fundamental need for a change of direction; we can continue on a path which consumes ever-more resources and trust that economic growth, monetary prosperity, and technological innovation will resolve our problems. While this may be the dominant narrative in mass-media, it is also a story that largely disregards, denies, or downplays the growing social and ecological crises of our time. The second story, the “Great Unravelling,” clearly recognizes the severity of current crises, but also emphasize impending doom, making it



Figure 1: The Spiral Process of the Work that Reconnects
Illustration by Dori Midnight, used with permission

seem impossible to avert catastrophe. The WTR affirms the frame of the third story, that of the “Great Turning,” which recognizes the serious crises we face but also asserts that it is still possible to bring about the transformations needed to create “a life-sustaining society” which works for the healing and recovery of the world (Macy & Johnstone, 2012, p. 26). At its core, this story of hope affirms that “dire predictions notwithstanding,” we can still “choose life,” “meet our needs without destroying our life-support system,” and “act to ensure a livable world” (Macy & Brown, 1998, p. 16) – but only if major changes to the way we perceive, live, and act are made. In presenting this story, the role of creative social movements working for change is often emphasized.

Along with the belief that such a transformation is possible, a number of other assumptions underlie the WTR, most of which are drawn from deep ecology, systems theory, and ecopsychology (Bradbury, 2003; Hollis-Walker, 2012). Like deep ecology and ecopsychology, the WTR assumes that the world is alive and interconnected, that we have an innate bond with all of life (like biophilia), and that our self extends beyond the boundaries of our skin to embrace the wider world: “Our true nature is far more ancient and encompassing than the separate self defined by habit and society” (Macy & Brown, 1998, p. 59). We have evolved on Earth, the Earth is woven into us, and the Earth can even know itself through us. Secondly, we experience pain for the world precisely because of this interconnection: “Feelings of pain for our world are natural and healthy” and are only maladaptive or “morbid if denied” (Johnstone, 2002, pp. 187-188). Repressing or compulsively avoiding pain saps our vitality, dulls our minds, and deadens our spirits and capacity for joy. In contrast, sharing and expressing this pain can actually serve to reconnect us with others – both humans and the greater web of life – unblocking energy, building community, and empowering action (Macy, 1995). Thirdly, “cognitive information about the crises we face, or even about our psychological responses to them,” while necessary, is insufficient to empower effective action; we need to experience our feelings of pain and also “our mutual belonging to the web of life” at “a visceral level” (Macy & Brown, 1998, p. 59). Experiencing interconnection also spurs transformative learning, bringing relational concepts into focus and clarifying the mind while reorganizing, reorienting, and grounding our meaning perspectives. Simultaneously, experiencing a closer connection with the Earth community stimulates both the desire and courage to act on its behalf. Moreover, “when we identify with and act for our world, it becomes possible to find allies” in the other living organisms around us as well as “the ancestors or future beings” (Johnstone, 2002, p. 199). Not only does this sense of interconnection provide strength and support, we may actually come to perceive a larger wisdom at work in the world that can creatively guide and act through us.

Thomashow (1998) observes that ecological learning poses perceptual challenges that demand “imaginative juxtapositions of place and time” (p. 280). Together with emotional work, the WTR uses the imagination to broaden a sense of connection, deepen empathy, and stimulate creative thinking. A variety of interactive exercises and meditations use the imagination to connect with past, future, or other-than-human beings. Imagination also enables us to put ourselves into the place of another, allowing us to experience reality from different perspectives. The capacity to identify and empathize with others is fundamental to developing an “ability to see oneself embedded in the biosphere” (Thomashow, 2002, p. 121). Recent research on the mirror neurons that fire in sympathetic response to the emotions of others demonstrates that both visual and motor areas of the brain are involved (Hall, 2010), implying that empathy and compassion may enable us to bodily experience the feelings of others and motivate action.

The WTR in Practice

From the above discussion, it is clear that the Work that Reconnects can be understood as a process of transformative learning that seeks to shift feelings, perceptions, understandings, and actions towards an embodied ecological consciousness characterized by a more relational worldview, a new conception of power, and engagement for sustainability and social justice (O'Sullivan, 2002). Over more than thirty years of practice, a wide variety of meditations and exercises have been created to facilitate different aspects of the WTR (see Macy, 2014; Macy & Brown, 2014). In order to provide a concrete example of the process and illustrate some of its strengths and limitations, this paper will consider a six-hour workshop using the WTR that I facilitated in September 2013 with a self-selected group of 36 young adults in a third-year undergraduate course on ecological worldviews. Of these, 33 women participated and three men. Following the event, participants wrote papers on their experiences reflecting on the exercises they found most helpful or meaningful as well as those they found most difficult and challenging. Participants also reflected on what they learned through the experience; the role that imagination, emotions, and community played in their learning; and the benefits and limitations of using the WTR process in this format.

Several months after the course was complete, 13 participants – all women – volunteered to let me analyze their reflection papers. The names of all participants have been anonymized using pseudonyms. Their reflections were qualitatively analyzed and representative comments (on average, 2-3/participant) summarizing what participants found helpful, difficult, meaningful, challenging, or counterproductive about each exercise were chosen for inclusion in this paper. Similarly, reflections on the experience of the workshop as a whole – including the role of community, emotions, and imagination in learning – were summarized and comments representing a wide range of views and opinions were selected.

The workshop began with an overview of the WTR – particularly the four stages in the process and its underlying assumptions – together with a presentation on the three stories of our time (Business as Usual, the Great Unravelling, and the Great Turning) and the possible role of current generations in this critical time. Several participants in the workshop found this framing of the crisis to be particularly empowering. For example, Kaitlin noted that previously, she saw her generation's role to be one of simply "fixing the problems initiated and propelled by previous generations;" however, the idea of both the Great Unravelling and Great Turning happening simultaneously helped her "to realize the unique position" of her generation: "Depending on what we do, we may proceed towards continued destruction or persistent recovery."

Coming from Gratitude

To begin by experiencing a sense of gratitude and connection, the group participated an "Elemental Breaths" meditation that I adapted from a

traditional Sufi practice. During this exercise, participants experience different ways of breathing that develop a bodily awareness of our interconnection with other organisms through time and space using the traditional elements of earth, water, fire, and air. Reflecting on this exercise, Lydia discovered “how powerful the act of breathing can be” insofar as it serves “as a tool for actively thinking about the relationship between the Earth and humans, and the way in which we are interconnected to the environment” that deepens a sense of gratitude.

Following the meditation, participants formed pairs for an open sentences exercise in which each person spontaneously continued speaking on a theme initiated by a short initial phrase such as: “The place in nature most special to me is...” Each participant takes turns either speaking or listening, but no interruptions are allowed. Using this technique, participants spoke of the places they loved most, situations that move them to awe and gratitude, and their personal passions. Nicole noted that this exercise filled her with “a deep sense of awe and gratitude” and helped her to realize that a sense of “deep emotional connections” with particular places in nature serves “as a tool for actively thinking about the relationship between the Earth and humans, and the way in which we are interconnected.” At the same time, Lydia noted that “listening without discussion allowed me to focus only on what the person was saying, not what I would respond back,” facilitating a deep sharing on the ecological state of the world “in a safe environment” that made “it easier to address the changes needed.”

Overall, Ashley found that “expressing gratitude allows people to move towards a less anthropocentric and egocentric view to one that appreciates the people and things around them.” Sonia observed that gratitude helped her to become more conscious of the generosity of all the organisms that sustain life and built a sense of “moral duty to protect other species from being harmed as a result of human activities.” Similarly, Tanya noted that gratitude enabled her to experience interconnectivity with the larger biosphere, instilling a sense of purpose.

Honoring our Pain for the World

Participants began working through their experiences of suffering and honoring their pain for the world by taking part in a meditation where they could hear the sounds of the rainforest and see the richness of its life. Then, pictures and sounds of cutting the forest were presented, along with some global statistics on deforestation. Tanya observed that “by closing my eyes and listening to forest logging, my reality was transformed from the space occupied by my body, into that forest.” Being able to both hear and see the process of deforestation and its aftermath “allowed me to see the loss for what it was, rather than being able to forget about it a few minutes later.”

Time was then given to process the emotions evoked using another meditation, “Breathing Through,” in which participants are invited to focus on their breathing and then, using a series of visualizations, to fully open their “awareness to the suffering that is present in the world,” to drop all defenses,

and “to breathe in the pain like dark granules on the stream of air... and out again into the world net” without hanging onto it – simply letting it pass through their hearts. The central idea here is to *experience* the pain but not to *remain in it*, to let sorrows “ripen by passing them through” the heart and to then make “good compost out of all that grief,” learning from the process while continuing to breathe (Macy & Brown, 1998, pp. 190-191). While Elizabeth found “it painful to fully acknowledge the immense beauty and in contrast the even more present distress around” her, it was also “beneficial to become vulnerable to this pain” since this enabled her to experience herself as a compassionate being connected to the larger community of life. For Kelly, the exercise was a “helpful way to deal with disturbing information” that taught her to “accept the pain” and experience her care for living beings and nature while increasing her motivation to protect them.

Following time for reflection in small groups, the participants then engaged in an interactive exercise called “The Milling” where they first pass each other quickly as though rushing along a busy street, then gradually begin to slow down and notice the people around them. A series of one-on-one encounters then begins in which participants are invited to stop in front of another, hold their hands, and look into each other’s eyes while a series of reflections are read out. Participants are asked, for example, to look on the other person with gratitude for taking the time to participate in this workshop, to appreciate this person’s willingness to face the pain of the world, and to contemplate the possibility that she or he may play a crucial role in bringing about the Great Turning. Of all the exercises during the day, this one often proved to be the most challenging. Many participants found it uncomfortable to look into the eyes of another – especially someone they might not know well. Several participants noted that this exercise challenges dominant societal norms that value a sense of personal space, individualism, and an idea that the world is made up of independently existing subjects disconnected from one another. Tina reflected that this exercise helped increase her awareness of connection with other humans: “Looking people in the eyes and holding their hand helps develop intimacy with others.” Even though it was at first uncomfortable, “this activity showed me how much I can connect with someone simply by engaging in these actions.” Joanne experienced the “importance of touch and interaction through our hands” in building a deeper sense of relationship while Kelly found that eye contact encouraged her to “let down [her] barriers, be vulnerable, and have trust in the person with whom [she] was sharing the experience.”

Seeing with new Eyes

Seeing with new eyes seeks to facilitate a perceptual shift towards a wider and more inclusive sense of self, a more emergent and collective understanding of power, and a fuller sense of time (Macy & Johnstone, 2012). The first exercise employed, “The Systems Game,” interactively helps participants to experience self-organization in systems with simple feedback loops. Gathered in a limited space, each person chooses two others at random and tries to remain equidistant from both as the group moves around until stasis is achieved.

Elements are added to illustrate how systems react to disturbances to regain equilibrium. Afterwards, time is spent to debrief and discuss the basic principles of self-organization and emergence in open systems as well as the implication of these for our understanding of power. Elizabeth noted that this physical, hands-on approach to learning was an engaging way to learn about systems and the Gaia hypothesis. Tina observed that the exercise demonstrates that we are all connected and that we must constantly self-organize to be in a healthy state: “Humans are affected by other people’s actions and as a species, humans affect and are affected by other species.” Tanya remarked this kind of embodied exercise “allows the very literal ideals of transformation to become physically embedded within the student” in contrast to simply “reading academic sources in a disconnected classroom.”

The following exercise, “Widening Circles,” was used to expand learners’ sense of self by asking each participant to speak (in the first person) on an issue they are passionate about from four perspectives: Their own, that of a person with an opposing opinion, that of a non-human entity affected by the issue (animal, plant, river, etc.), and that of a future person who will be affected. In so doing, imagination is used to expand each participant’s empathy by asking them to assume the perspective of the other. Sonia reflected that she “learned that we feel the pain of other species... because we are all unified through bonds of sympathy and affection.” Elizabeth observed that assuming the role of the person with an opposing view and arguing from their perspective “allows us to remove our preconceived ideas and spend some time looking at the issue from the other side.” This enabled her to become more sensitive and aware of the opinions of others and facilitated a shift to a more inclusive worldview. Sonia notes that critical thinking was also integrated because she needed to speak on both the pros and the cons of her chosen issue, whale hunting.

The “Double Circle” exercise was then used to facilitate a broader sense of time, stimulate concern for future generations, and help participants understand the role they could play in bringing about the Great Turning. Sitting in two concentric circles, one facing outward and the other inward, each person engages in one-on-one dialogues with someone in the other circle. Those in the inner circle take on the role of persons two centuries into an imagined future when the Great Turning has become a reality; those in the outer circle take on the role of their ancestors – persons from our own time. In a series of rotating dialogues, the “ancestors” speak of what it is like to live in our current time of crisis, how persons began to work for the Great Turning, and what sustained them during their struggles. Finally, the future persons respond to what they have heard and seek to affirm and express gratitude for their “ancestors.”

Some participants found this exercise difficult or contrived. Nicole, for example, felt that instead of imagining a time when the Great Turning has come about, we should instead be speaking of the steps needed to get there (which, ironically perhaps, is actually one of the objectives of the exercise). Tanya, while at first skeptical, found the exercise more helpful: “The Double

Circle opened my imagination— something often constrained throughout Western education which advocates logical and rational responses.” Tina observed that this exercise made her realize that she has a personal responsibility for protecting the Earth for the sake of her own future grandchildren: “After this activity I decided I must do my best to protect the environment, regardless of whether I am successful or not.”

Going Forth

This final phase seeks to help participants find concrete ways of living out an active, transformative hope in their daily lives. An exercise that I call the “Incarnation Committee” was used to help each learner to imaginatively reflect on how their own unique gifts and talents could be used in the service of the Great Turning. Lila noted that “these questions made me rethink about the legacy I will leave behind, which I hope will be a positive impact globally and contribute to a future of positive change.” A brief film featuring Paul Hawken was also shown to demonstrate the size and diversity of social movements currently working to effect social change in order to stimulate hope and encourage active political engagement for change.

In a final activity, participants shared possible obstacles that might prevent them from taking action. The ones most frequently shared include self-doubt or lack of confidence, anxiety about the future (including whether it was “already too late” to avert disaster), and fear of leaving behind a life of comfort and the lifestyle of consumerism. (This last fear may indicate how wider economic forces contribute to psychological factors impeding effective action.) Participants shared these obstacles in the wider group and some opportunity was given to discuss them.

Learnings, Benefits, Challenges, and Conclusions

In reflecting on the workshop process, participants noted a number of learnings, benefits, and challenges of the Work that Reconnects. On the one hand, the process provides a holistic process that engages the mind, emotions, imagination, and body to build community, provide a sense of possibility and empowerment, and transform perspectives and worldviews. Yet, particularly in a short, one-day process, some of these transformations may not be as deep or long-lasting as might be desired.

The integral nature of the learning process was affirmed by a number of participants. Kaitlin noted that worldviews cannot be changed simply by presenting facts and arguments; this process was effective because it involves “the body, mind, imagination and a supportive community.” For Helen, the process’s interactive nature “highlights the interconnectedness of the participants with one another, as well as with the greater world, which once again leads to an emotional connection.” Fully experiencing emotions makes participants “feel directly implicated in the topic” and thus they are “more willing to change.” Kaitlin remarked that the use of the imagination helped her to see from a variety of perspectives.

Over the course of the workshop, Lila experienced a greater sense of connection with her classmates, a better ability to appreciate the insights of others, and increased support derived from finding others passionate about pro-ecological action, highlighting that transformative learning is not necessarily individualistic, but rather that a supportive learning community may actually enhance the transformative potential of a process. Helen affirmed that the workshop built a sense of interconnection and empowerment where participants experience “the capacity to instigate change.” This was also often accompanied with a transformation in perspective toward a wider and more inclusive sense of self. Abby, for example, notes that before the workshop, the environment was important to her but that she thought her “individuality did not extend beyond the barrier of [her] own skin.” The Breathing Through exercise, however, enabled her to perceive “how all life is affected by and, in turn, affects the contents of the stream and the stream itself” which helped her to widen her own sense of self and overcome “divisions between mind and body, spirit and breath, and human and environment.” Lila experienced a wider sense of self that extends into future generations. At the same time, she gained a sense of a global social movement working for change which makes her “more willing to take risks towards building a better future.” Two workshop participants decided to take up meditation practices following the workshop as a way to deepen their own sense of connection with nature and find peace and sustenance in the struggle to address challenging ecological concerns.

Yet, there are also very real limitations to what can be accomplished in a short, one-day workshop. Nicole was concerned that, while participants leave feeling inspired, this enthusiasm might soon wear off as the routines and demands of everyday life reassert themselves. She believes the process would be more effective if used over a longer period of time and with more opportunities for debriefing, discussion, and exploring ways to concretely change lifestyles and plan actions. This kind of process could lead to more feelings of guilt unless participants are able “to translate emotional passion into meaningful action... through a concentration on the development of practical skills, action plans, and lifestyle changes.” Abby would also have liked to have more time to explore concrete actions and solutions while Lydia suggested more time for debriefing and personal reflection: “I think taking time to check in on participants to see what their thoughts or emotions are throughout the day can alleviate overwhelming feelings and exhaustion that can come with all day workshops.”

In part, these limitations may have been due to the relatively short time available for the process and the different levels of motivation present in the group. It is noteworthy that the sample participants volunteered to participate in the workshop knowing that it would involve experiential, interactive exercises – some of which would involve limited physical contact such as holding hands (albeit more details as to the nature of the specific exercises were not provided beforehand). Persons who were not as open to entering into interactive (or meditative) exercises might not be as receptive to the process or benefit from it to the same degree. Having worked as a WTR facilitator in a variety of settings including workshops with teachers, graduate education

students, and environmental educators and activists, I have found that the process works best when more time is available for the group to build trust and when the participants already share at least a moderate commitment to ecological concerns. Participants also need to feel free to not participate in particular exercises – such as those involving limited physical contact or meditations – or to modify their participation to suit their comfort levels. Among those with a lesser degree of commitment, the process works better when more time is given to the first phase focusing on gratitude as this tends to minimize defensiveness and build ecological concern more gradually. The exercises requiring a greater level of trust, particularly those which may lead participants to experience emotions like grief, work best in groups with higher levels of trust and interest in ecological concerns. It should also be noted that, while the WTR is often used in a workshop or retreat setting, the basic logic of the spiral is applicable to other learning contexts. Ashley saw the spiral as something she could apply in her daily life “as a way to deal with my connection issues with people.” For example, instead of trying to raise ecological awareness by presenting arguments and shocking facts, conversations can begin by engaging in topics and questions that help people connect with the places, people, animals, and plants they love and care about.

Based on the reflections of the workshop participants, it seems evident that many experienced transformative learning that went well beyond the acquisition of information to effect a deeper shift in consciousness, feelings, and – to at least some extent – actions. The WTR process – including the rich body of exercises and meditations that have been developed by its facilitators – contributes a wide variety of tools and insights to facilitate a transformation in our understandings of power, our vision for a more just and sustainable society, and the way we relate to other humans and the wider Earth community. In so doing, it activates a grounded sense of hope perhaps best captured by the observation of Kelly who observed that, while “we are currently at a crossroads of the ecological crisis, we have a choice of which road to take. These choices can be described as the Great Unravelling and the Great Turning.” If we frame the crisis as an opportunity for transformation, work through painful emotions, and envision new possibilities, we can indeed “empower people to contribute to creative solutions.”

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