

## Stretched and Ready: Reflections on Whole Communities Work

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There are many nights each year that the wind keeps me awake. It is powerful enough to push furniture off our porch, peel the skin from the mountain yurt and drop a tree on a tent. The wind is something to be taken seriously, and yet there's little I can do but pay attention, be careful, and repair the damage the next day. The wind signals a change in the weather, and as I listen I lie in bed taking in all that I love and holding tightly.

A night of powerful wind can feel much like the experience of facilitating a retreat. Change also comes about when a group asks itself the provocative question, What are we for? Encouraged by new leadership, many of us have been asking this question about our country. Center for Whole Communities has been asking this question of ourselves and of our brothers and sisters working for change. *What are we for?* This is a transformational moment in our country and also in our work. John Haines, poet laureate of Alaska wrote, "What does it take to make a journey? A place to start from ... and something to leave behind." All along this journey of creating Center for Whole Communities, we've grappled with how to create a safe harbor, here on the land, for different people to ask themselves the hard questions about what kind of world we want to live in and how we get there together. But who is "we" at Center for Whole Communities and what lengths are "we" willing to go to understand what "together" really means?

The most constant and, perhaps, important aspect of the journey has been our intuition that we must be willing to ask ourselves questions that challenge and expose us, and to allow ourselves to be changed by the answers. The journey has never been easy, never been completely successful, and yet we've never turned back. As a result, the faces of our alumni are more diverse, the quality of our work has improved immeasurably, and the lives of many with whom we have deeply collaborated--colleagues, faculty, alumni, board members--have changed.

Our early work was about reconnecting similar people with the source of their activism around land. The edge that we pushed back then was around bringing together opposing forces within the same world--loggers and wilderness advocates or conservationists and farmers, for example. We helped these leaders to look up from the

deep grooves of their lives to see one another with more humility and to taste the possibility of moving from isolation and opposition toward something bigger and more powerful. That work was important and yet insufficient; we plowed forward with our alumni, many of whom later became our faculty and board members, in asking deeper questions. Who is missing from the table that we set? What separates people in this country and keeps larger movements from happening? What are the values of the movements in which we are part and where is there contradiction between what is professed and what is lived out? Where is that contradiction within Center for Whole Communities? One alumnus from that era put it this way, “you can’t go along talking about bridging divides, talking about equity, talking about social justice when you’re sitting in a group where there is none.” Thus began our real work, which was the journey of leaving things behind, of seeing how we were insufficient to meet our own dreams, and of knowing that if we can change and really see one another, there something infinitely more transformative in the collective.

It has been our deep belief in humanity’s relationship to land, from cities to rural places like Vermont, that made it essential that we should grapple [with](#) the effects of race, class, power and privilege as they play out around relationships to land, as well as in the culture of all movements for change. Many questions arose: How is it that those of us who care about people and those who care about the land have ended up today divided from one another? Why does mainstream environmentalism in our country include so few people of color? What can be done to identify and heal these barriers and divides?

In 2006, our staff and board adopted an organizational statement on Land, Race, Power and Privilege (you can read this on our website). In 2007, we passed more of the responsibility for co-creating the curriculum to our increasingly multi-cultural, multi-racial faculty. In 2008, we prepared a new edition of that curriculum born out of a four day faculty retreat at the Highlander Center in Tennessee in which the guiding theme was multicultural approaches to teaching about relationship to land and place. We left that retreat feeling strong about emphasizing personal identity and difference as the essential inquiry and path to finding shared story and purpose.

Our 2008 season went further with these ideas and reached many more leaders. We awarded 100 fellowships, convened 8 retreats at Knoll Farm and 6 workshops around

the country. With these leaders, we helped to define a national food justice movement; helped growers and conservationists in the mid-Atlantic; environmental educators in New England; and activists around the country working on climate change, water scarcity and privatization, and social justice. We helped these leaders see their work through the lens of whole thinking: the effort to see and act for and from the whole.

All of our participants felt stretched by this difficult and important season. For many, the experience ranked among the highs of their professional lives. Kim Coble of the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, reflected, “the retreat stretched me, challenged me, taught me and encouraged me in ways I have not felt for a long time... The analogy that I’ve used to describe my experience is that I had become a well worn rug that was lifted and shaken out and came back to life in brighter colors. There is not a day that goes by that I don’t think about my experience and what I learned.” Gratefully, our alumni believe enough in us to engage critically in evolving and deepening the body of work. We heard three consistent questions:

- 1) How do we talk deeply about racism and still leave room for other forms of oppression to be surfaced and healed? By focusing on racial oppression, are we neglecting other forms of oppression around differences such as gender, sexual orientation, and class?
- 2) By exploring identity and difference so early in the week-long curriculum, have we allowed the group to establish enough of a groundwork of shared values to allow them to move beyond their differences to explore the possibilities of transformation? Some groups got “stuck” on exploring oppression and the over-all retreat experience for some was unresolved.
- 3) While knowing the importance of these deep personal dialogues about oppression and healing, how do we move beyond the personal to movement building? This summer, we were not consistently and clearly mapping the connections between personal issues and the way they play out culturally and structurally in our professional lives.

These questions bring us to the heart of the matter. Each and every one of us – regardless of our race- needs to spend time in another’s seat if we are to be whole. As one alumnus put it, “We each need to understand the difficulties of being a woman in a man’s world, or a lesbian in a straight world, or an older person in a world of youth or disabled in a world of able or a person of color in a white world.”

We have always said that the primary objective of the whole thinking program is to create stronger movements for change by reweaving disparate sectors. Although there is no doubt that our retreats nurture personal well-being, creativity, and help people more fully realize their own path, we have never positioned ourselves as a retreat center for individuals, or even a leadership training center where the emphasis is on each single person. Our emphasis has always been on recognizing the power of the collective and reweaving the whole.

If our objective is to reweave the whole, then we must be willing to delve into all issues of oppression that prevent that whole. We found this summer that the very real, too-seldom explored, and deeply rooted issues of racism, power and privilege took center stage, sometimes at the exclusion of all else – issues of class, gender, politics, religion, etc. This is real, it needed to happen, but what is also real is that some participants left this summer feeling less than “whole,” and even confused about our curriculum and its purpose. Our goal is to surface and confront all the forms of oppression and difference that stand in the way of movement building, while keeping hold of the larger, collective reason of why we have come together in the first place – to see each other more whole, to see a new story, together. In the end, the goal is to see difference more clearly but to see it as a foreground, and to see way beyond it.

We continue to search for the most effective lens through which to view a dialogue on race, power and privilege. Should exposing *oppression* of all types be the focus of the curriculum, or should we come at that only after putting *well-being* at the center, as Sayra Pinto-Wilson advocates in her work? Some of our alumni asked us, “Are we missing the mark if the only pain and hurt and privilege we explore are centered on the color of our skin?” It’s not enough to acknowledge ones’ privilege and then become stuck in guilt, anger, or isolation. And Sayra Pinto Wilson has repeatedly said that no one

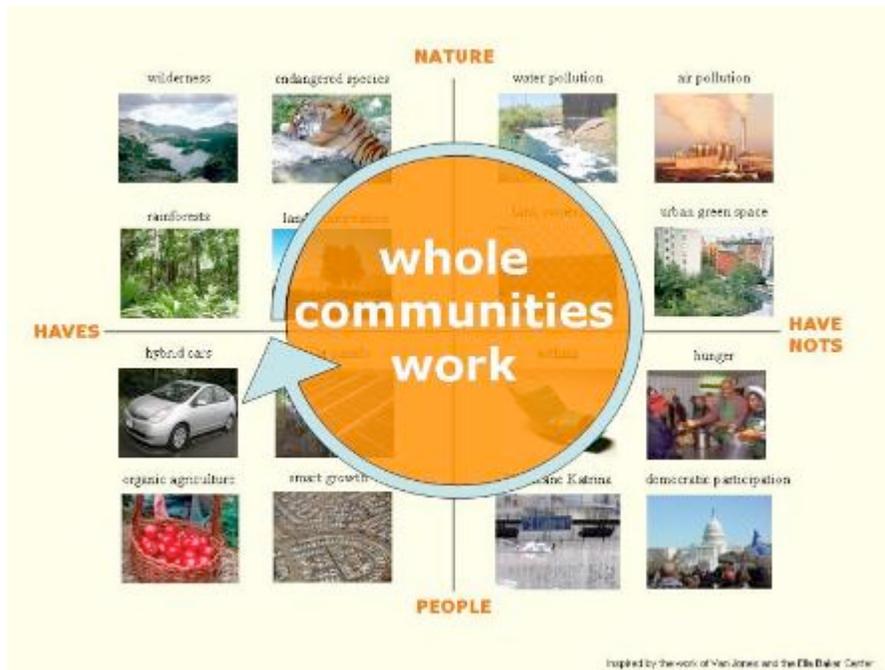
benefits from the “oppression Olympics” where one group of people insist that they are more deeply oppressed than another. How do we talk about oppression in terms of our longing? How do we talk about difference in terms of our own well-being and what we most want to conserve? Our goal is to better understand what we can achieve together with the pieces of our lives.

We must always make an equal invitation to everyone to speak about their longing and the conditions for their well being. We learn best when we have a sense of well-being and belonging, and so we wish to cultivate this. Therein are the seeds of transformation for each of us, as well as a form of leadership that can transform others. This new brand of leadership includes listening, dismantling racism, adaptation and flexibility, making room for others and cultivating a moral voice. The primary emphasis of all of our education programs must on the new story, and to reach that new story we must explore our differences and our individual stories. Yet we can not end on those individual stories. In 2005, an alumnus asked of us, “We need to knock it up to the next level. Anybody can go on a retreat to get into themselves- I’ve benefitted from many retreats that have helped me get clear about my individual role, but I think Center for Whole Communities is much too valuable for that.” We must always attempt to find the collective story that we can create together.

We’ve seen that the best retreats can utterly transform people’s notion of which others are, what they themselves are capable of, and how a deeper connection with life and others is possible. We judge our success by how well each group moves through discomfort to a real understanding of one another and to a positive energy and palpable joy that comes from a very diverse group of people who are respecting one another and learning together. Can they also go beyond the personal to a full exploration of movement-building? How might we adapt our curriculum to meet all of these goals?

The Whole Communities map (shown below), which was inspired directly by the groundbreaking work of Van Jones, is helpful in describing the movement-building aspects of our work. It illustrates the isolation among sectors that plagues the entire movement, and it explains the role that privilege plays in creating divides and weaknesses

in all movements for change. Our work is to help leaders in different sections of this map to see and hear one another so that true, deep collaboration and innovation is possible.



Our movements for change in this country are *as divided and fragmented* as our culture. First, there is the divide between those who care about people and those who care about nature. This divide is worsened by the fracture between those who have privilege and those who do not. If you have financial resources and care about nature, you may be interested in wilderness protection, land conservation and so on. If you have little privilege and care most about people, perhaps you are interested in public health, structural racism, democratic participation, and hunger. Our point is this: all of these concerns are critically important, and none will succeed without the other. Those who care about endangered species will not make enduring progress without those who care about Katrina.

The complexity of today's problems makes it unlikely for any effort to succeed in isolation. To focus on a single issue today is both a privilege as well as a source of

isolation. And focusing on a single issue can lead an organization to be overly competitive, more prone to exaggeration, and less adaptive and resilient.

The map also shows a level of isolation and blindness on the part of leaders *in all four quadrants*. An individual leader must first acknowledge this isolation and blindness before it can be overcome, and that requires a great deal of personal self-awareness and humility. In order for a shift in relationships to happen, it is not sufficient, for example, to simply share information about water issues and expect that different leaders of different sectors will then become water advocates. The challenge is not information but transformation. We see transformation only when leaders first reach a complete understanding of what divides them from others and, then subsequently, when there has been sufficient dialogue together to understand that they can not succeed alone. We aspire to reweave and strengthen the movement from the center.

With each question we ask have come more questions, and in our journey to answer them we see how our lives, and the success of our programs, expand and contract in direct proportion to our courage. Where have we shown courage in this work?

We have shown courage in confronting models of conservation and environmentalism that have forgotten people and community, and in confronting models of community development that have forgotten land and creatures. We've held the courage to re-imagine the order of things, to point out that laws don't save places, only people do. We've had the courage to stay on the long path of confronting the history of race, class, privilege, and power in our own lives and in all movements for change. We've shown the courage to reweave, repair, and reconnect people and movements in an era of individualism, isolation and divides. We've shown the courage to learn from those who are willing to engage with us and point out to us where we need to do better. I remember this evaluation from 2004: "As it's set up now, they are basically experiencing privilege within privilege. I trust [they] are going in the right direction even if I find myself disagreeing with what they do to get there."

Dr. King said "we can not walk alone," and we've tried to understand, more than superficially, why this is true. We've tried to model what we teach by constantly asking ourselves how we must change to meet others where they are, to hear them and to know them. Our definition of "together" has broadened every week. What began seven years

ago as a way to help conservationists re-imagine the power of their work is now an arc of learning that strengthens diverse leaders from multiple disciplines by helping them to map their own strengths, to explore differences, to imagine their community whole and to fully understand that their success is bound up in the success of others.

Thank you for staying with us when we didn't get it right, for believing in us enough to help us be more aware and more successful. No matter where we are, our vision arises from a love of people and a love of land, and from our belief that every being is entitled to live to their greatest potential. We hope our work will inform the lives of farm workers and college professors, philanthropists and the homeless, politicians and voters, conservationists and affordable housing advocates, businesspeople and biologists, you and me.