

Facing Change

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Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.

—James Baldwin

2011 marks ten years since Helen and I moved to a hill farm and began the experiment of bringing people together that is now known as Center for Whole Communities. We were kindling a small flame we hardly had words for; we wanted to create a place to nurture a healthier humanity amidst the failed and broken relationships between people and between people and the land. We started where we were: two white people on a farm in Vermont. Our first programs back then brought together the worlds we knew: wilderness advocates and loggers searching to find common ground, for example, or land conservationists and farmers striving to better understand what they shared. The participants of those early programs were primarily white and upper-middle class. We could have continued to work that way, in some comfort knowing that we were helping to change the conversation within the traditional environmental movement, but we didn't aspire to incremental change and we knew how important it was to move away from what felt comfortable. We knew that authentic, workable, just environmental and social innovations could not be found without a great diversity of voices speaking around the table, in an atmosphere where they all felt they could be heard. One thing we learned early on is that it is not enough simply to put out an invitation and set the table. So began the long journey of looking closely at our practices, our language, our ways of welcoming and accommodating people, our faculty, our curriculum, our staff and our board in designing and implementing programs that might better make it possible for a much wider diversity of people to face one another with deep respect and with the shared goal of saving ourselves and this earth.

It has been an ongoing journey, and a humbling one.

In a set of program evaluations in 2004, one participant posed this question to the interviewer: "Why are Peter and Helen doing this?" Why, we were asked and had to ask ourselves, were two

white people leading this work on a farm in Vermont, of all places? If we were serious about this work, why not do it where people of color, and urban activists, might feel more comfortable and welcomed? In times of personal confusion, I often fall back on the words of Scott Nearing, long deceased radical politician and farmer, who said it straight up: “Do the best you can in the place where you are, and be kind.” Helen and I came to Knoll Farm with the aspiration to be in service to the land and to a larger community. which We did not, back then, fully understand where this aspiration would take us. At times we have been well-intentioned but naïve, visionary but unskilled, and in many ways our vision has always been larger than our capacities to enact it. But, consistently, we’ve done what we could in the place where we found ourselves at the time, and this has been our radical invitation to others.

We are deeply grateful that, despite our limitations and the limitations of our place, there have been many who believed enough in our vision to contribute their own skills to it. In these ten years, more than eight hundred individuals, families, and foundations have made it possible for us to offer one thousand fellowships to people in forty-seven states to participate in some ninety retreats led by a committed faculty of twenty. With the help of many, we have also cocreated a new way of measuring success that brings together social justice and environmentalism. All of this is not insignificant, neither is it unsuccessful nor incremental, but it is insufficient. We aspire not to grow bigger, but to do better work. We aspire to more fully walk our talk, and to model the very things we teach, and we aspire to trust and be trusted. We have always needed skill and grace to act responsibly and to recognize that tension arises when what we attempt to grasp exceeds our reach particularly around issues of race, power, and privilege.

Three years ago, I recognized that a fundamental way to begin to address these essential issues of walking the talk on power and privilege was to transition Center for Whole Communities to an organization of shared leadership, and to one where a white male (me) was not leading it. After that transition happens in spring of 2011, I will remain deeply connected to CWC’s work, but in a different capacity than the founder and director. I will also remain deeply connected to my lifelong journey of becoming more aware about all the issues we work on at the Center. My relationship to this place and to this work will continue to transform me. It is teaching me how to pay closer attention, to go beyond what I see on the surface, to be more patient.

The educator Parker Palmer famously said, “We teach who we are,” and today a crucial question I grapple with is, “Can we teach how to move toward who we hope to become?” If the story of our lives is about evolution, about the distance we can travel from *who we are* to *who we can become*, how do we best help ourselves and others stay on that journey? How do we skillfully critique who we are today while offering encouragement to become more aware of who we will be tomorrow? If I ask you to change, then surely I must first ask myself to change. This is true for all of us, so how do we help one another walk the road between who we are and who we might become?

In Jungian psychoanalysis, in all modern substance abuse recovery programs, in Native American vision quests, and in Jewish rites of passage, when individuals return from a difficult soul journey to the people whom they had left behind, those left behind must be able to witness a change in the one who traveled the journey, otherwise the traveller will re-embodiment the story he or she had previously held before the journey. When you embark on your own soul journey, if others close to you are either unwilling or unable to accept the change within you, no matter how big or small, it becomes nearly impossible for you to live that change. No one can succeed in this hard work of transformation without the encouragement of others.

To those of us, people and organizations, who strive to reach for something, we must offer a transparency and humility that others can see. And when others can see this honesty and this intention, my greatest hope is that they will reward us with their encouragement. In our own case, CWC has been an articulation of *a vision for change*, not always a reality of change. For example, in 2004 we put forward “An Organizational Statement on Land, Race, Power and Privilege,” and our work certainly has not always lived up to this statement. We have always been catching up to our own vision; we have always been on a journey between being and becoming. Some have judged us, fairly, as not walking our talk as carefully as they would like; others have applauded us for making the steps.

I have discovered, personally, that doing this work also requires a willingness to be critiqued and to change, and, at many times, to occupy an uncomfortable place between worlds. Being an edge-walker requires the willingness to have your motives questioned, to be held to a higher standard, to be critiqued more than you are encouraged, to become a lightning rod for all that hasn’t worked in the past. In this work of creating what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., called “the

beloved community,” whether you are a member of an oppressed minority or a privileged dominant oppressor, you must be willing to lose your membership in the world where you were most at home.

The ethical scientist, Aldo Leopold, wrote, “the penalties of an ecological education are to live alone in a world of wounds.” The penalty for an awareness of how race has affected our relationships with the land and with one another is also to live in a world of wounds, trying not to repeat them but experiencing the pain nonetheless. But when together we can face these shared wounds, wounds to our hearts and to the land, honoring the journey that each of us is able to make, then the boundaries are more permeable between those who care about a river and those who care about human incarceration. Then the big work of transformation has begun.

Sometime early upon arriving at Knoll Farm, I was told that the word “radical” meant “enough,” and ever since I’ve asked myself, “Have I done enough to fulfill this radical dream?” My own moments of personal growth, and those of greatest stress and discomfort, have occurred at the point of tension between the sacred and the mundane, the tension between meeting the radical dream and meeting pay-roll, for example. Though I’ve made a career out of creating space for others, I often leave very little space in my own life or the life of this organization. I am driven, and so this organization has been driven. And most challenging of all, it’s a hard balancing act to consistently live at the very edge of one’s personal and professional competencies, endeavoring to be humble and transparent around what’s working and not working, and at the same time needing to make the case that we know enough about what we’re doing to get support.

I’m most proud of the risks we’ve taken: running a ten-year-long program tuition-free; engaging early in a journey on understanding the relationships between land, race, power, and privilege; and, for myself, understanding that the vision I care about the most is bigger than my own capacities. Creating space for Ginny McGinn, our new board, and future co-directors to contribute their own expertise is exactly what’s needed to nurture that radical dream of a land-based, intercultural leadership-development organization. In the exciting future ahead, I want to serve a Center for Whole Communities that has other home places, in addition to Knoll Farm, in core cities where we can demonstrate other aspects of the vital human relationship to land. I will also be honored to become part of a Whole Communities faculty who know how best to root personal transformation in stronger communities; who understand the direct causal relationship

between health of people and health of the earth; and who together can model how diversity—of race, class, power, privilege, ideology, and geography—is the source for innovation and positive change.

One question I was recently asked that is important to me to share in this essay is, “What have I been learning about leadership through the privilege of engaging with and listening to so many different people over the last ten years?” Some of the most important learning for me has come from the core practices of our programs; while other learning has come out of observations I have made about qualities of being, such as respect, in others, as the source of their grace and their effective leadership.

Respect. The word *respect* means, quite literally, to look again. I acknowledge that my first view of a subject is mostly a reflection of my own assumptions, my reactions to what I see in terms of my own history, and often bears little resemblance to what or whom I’m actually observing. To look again for what I most certainly missed, with less judgment or projection this time, is to show respect. Today, showing genuine respect enables us to meaningfully engage with others and to transform the biggest challenges, but respect is too often missing from our largest opportunities to work together. Here’s an example of what I mean. At a gathering last year in North Carolina, I heard Yvette, a Cherokee woman, speak of her people’s history, their forced removal from their land and genocide, this way: “It’s in our blood; it’s in our memory. We relive it everyday.” For her, the scars of “blood memory” meant that the present wrongs could not be addressed without addressing those of the past. Only months before, at a very different gathering, I heard a prominent conservationist say in response to someone else’s blood memory, “I live in the present, not the past. There’s nothing that I can do about the past. I choose, instead, to focus on the present and the future.” None of us live entirely in the present, and all of us today are impacted by the past. The only way, as I can see it, to move forward in creating a better future is to show respect through our capacity to listen and our willingness to make amends for what happened in the past. **Vision.** Respect and Vision are sisters who fight a lot with one another. The older, Respect, wants to see and honor what is in front of her, while her younger sister, Vision, is only interested in imagining what’s possible. Of course, both of these are needed in our lives of service leadership.

Vision enables us to see something that doesn't yet exist and, by bringing that possibility to the surface, makes it closer to becoming real. When you aspire to help create something new, you have to reach for a reality that is more elusive than what you might observe, a notion perhaps only reached through imagination, one which we can only hope for and pray for together.

Transformational leadership, the kind that changes the game, requires both balancing the tension between vision and respect by enabling us to pursue a dream and regularly see that dream in a fresh light, anew.

Personal Narrative and Story. Nothing is as transformative to relationships as the willingness to listen for and to share our personal narratives: the stories of what matters most to us and makes us who we are. When I hear your story, and you listen to mine, whatever tenuous fabric already holds us together grows stronger. I'm fortunate to have been told as a young man, "Nothing you could ever say or write, Peter, is as important as who you are." And I have been trying to live this philosophy by focusing less on what I know and more on my journey to learn something new. Very rarely am I ever going to be an expert who can impart information that someone else desperately needs; more often what I can offer others is the example of my own struggles and successes at becoming something. I have found that sharing story and personal narrative helps me to become something else by encouraging me to focus on what I don't know and what motivates me to evolve. When the stories of our lives are about only what we know, where is the room for discovery and change and new relationship?

Practice of Awareness. Many times a day I realize suddenly that my mind is on a train, speeding down some tracks, headed to somewhere I never intended to go, and I'm lost. I'm lost in some cobweb of thought—often emotions from the past—and I've got to refind my purpose and intention. I find that clear and caring mind, which helps me to be inherently powerful, by taking a walk in our fields, by looking at some pictures that are important to me, by working wood with my hands, by sitting and finding my breath. Just as there are invisible structures that keep dominant behavior and oppressive cultures in place, there are unseen forces that keep our minds unclear, fragmented, and unintentional. Surely some of these forces that keep us from our power are exterior and cultural: technology, the drive to multi-task and produce, etc. Others are interior,

however, like the simple fact that the mind has trouble being in the present. Whoever you think The Man is, he wants us distracted, separated from our power, in our silos, angry with one another, unable to dream together. For me personally, nothing has been more important in my development as a leader than my evolving capacity to be intentional, to actually do what I want to do, to be who I want to be, to strengthen my own clear and caring mind.

During the long march to defeat the Taft-Hartley Act, Cesar Chavez paused daily to do yoga. Many of the most inspiring young and old people I meet in our programs share one characteristic: they have found a daily practice that helps to keep them aware. Knowing the science of our earth and knowing the history of our societies is an enormous burden—a huge weight to carry on even the strongest shoulders—that can easily become anger, despondency, and fear. What we call *awareness practice* are the tools everyone can use to cultivate mindfulness and to recognize our own default postures: how, for example, we act under pressure or at times of high emotional stress. It's been helpful to recognize what happens to me at those times, when I default to my head and abandon my heart. At your own times of feeling overwhelmed, do you attack or retreat? Do you go into command and control? Learning how to be graceful and unflappable in these times, or at least aware of how and why one is triggered and how to respond appropriately afterward, has a lot to do with mindfulness, I believe. The practices we observe in order to build awareness and wholeness are meditation, silence, physical experience of shared work, and deep immersion in personal creativity, shared and individual experiences of nature.

Larry Yang, a meditation teacher in the East Bay and a member of our faculty, puts it this way: “You cannot change a problem until you can first see the problem.” Awareness practice gives me a more objective perspective, as if looking in a mirror. And, without doubt, emotions inevitably arise when we see ourselves, as well, perhaps, as the problems we are creating or adding to, more objectively. Awareness practice is then the source of gracefulness and equanimity that allows one to hold these self-observations and not push them away. Awareness practice is the primary way that our programs help people to slow down, which is an essential first step in transforming a situation, and to see ourselves and others differently. In the life of change-making, these are the muscles that I have observed being strengthened through an awareness practice:

Empathy for self and others. Behavioral change rarely is sustained from guilt or anger but more so from compassion and empathy. Awareness practices help our participants to transform guilt and anger into compassion and empathy.

Innovation and collaboration. Awareness practice, especially within facilitated meditation, gives a group a physical experience of breathing together, which may be an essential first step in actually working together. We intentionally have dialogue follow awareness practice in our programs because of the effect each undertaking has on the other. It's the awareness practice that helps people to find their own greatest wisdom, and it's having dialogue together that allows different people to seek out shared values. Combined, these steps create the atmosphere and conditions needed to support human collaboration. Collaboration is so hard for many to achieve in part because few know what it actually feels like to work in solidarity with others who are very different. Every week, we witness people being more able to share experience and to see one another, which results in their developing new ways of doing their work, which in turn is the source of innovation.

Ubuntu: the primacy of relationship and reciprocity. Leymah Roberta Gbowee is an African peace activist who played a large role in organizing the peace movement in Liberia in 2003, which led to the election of Liberia's first female president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. Gbowee began making these extraordinary peace efforts among child soldiers by working primarily with their mothers, which makes even more relevant her translation of the classical African concept of *Ubuntu*: "I can be who I am because of who you are."

At the core of our work has been the simple effort of helping very different people to take their best step toward one another. Through the use of story and visioning together, by practicing respect, and by building capacity for awareness, we are cultivating the soil for new alliances and relationships. The challenges to our culture and our planet are too severe to be adequately addressed by great organizations alone; these challenges must be confronted meaningfully by great relationships: alliances and deep collaborations where each party sees how its success is tied up in the success of the other parties. I imagine anyone reading this understands from their own life experience how fragmentation and isolation is institutionalized in our country right now. We are pitted against each other, divided by politics, by privilege, by race; and in our heart hearts, most of us also recognize that this separation is the opposite of wholeness.

As our one thousand alumni have moved to action, we see how these practices, which for a decade we've been experimenting with, learning about, and sharing, can help to lead communities out of such destructive divides. Imagine the possibilities for change when the solution to hunger is approached from land conservation, from organic agriculture, and from green business, not just from social services. Deep cultural shifts are not possible without relationship, and the leadership necessary to heal our earth and our human communities is not possible without relationships across sectors, divides, and difference. In 2011, the most effective leaders are not those who "know" the most, but those who demonstrate the capacity to build these relationships especially where there are none. Author, professor, and Whole Communities board member Carolyn Finney succinctly describes the connections necessary for meaningful response around climate change as: "bringing together the most connected and the most affected." And, of course, relationship is not just the foundation of good leadership but also the foundation for all change-making: that which builds relationships between people, and between people and the land, will restore health to both. That which doesn't will likely create divides and conflict.

Much of my work in the last decade has been to explore with our faculty and others how we apply these ideas to leadership. What does it practically mean, as Dana Meadows, the pioneering systems-thinker asked, "to see a problem whole?" What are the applications of this to leadership? Over the years, we've come to call our response "Whole Thinking," which is the difficult pursuit in leadership of identifying the root causes of problems; making visible the relationships between things, especially the relationship between problems; listening for the language and story that reflects where there is shared vision; tossing out old tools and picking up new ones; sharing budgets; recognizing and speaking about past mistakes and injustices. And when people and organizations practice *ubuntu* they become less brittle, more flexible, more innovative, and more adaptable. *Ubuntu* means being inclusive enough to see that our strength comes not merely from our knowledge, our position, our resources, but perhaps, today, even more, from our ability to see across the divide to recognize allies and practice "reciprocal transformation." Personally, that is the work I feel I have devoted myself to, and which I plan to spend a lifetime getting better at.