

Ongoing Discussion “Thought Piece”

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Out of Woods, Into the Garden

By
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Hope

At the time of this writing, I have just returned from a community transformation event in Detroit, a first gathering with several of the community leaders who have been tirelessly, heroically engaged in breaking the cycles of decay that plague the city. The community leaders were joined at this event by a few institutional members of SoL, among them DTE, Ford, Cigna, and me on behalf of Menlo Lab, a cross-sector network engaged in supporting systemic transformation in communities like Detroit. Meeting in what has aptly been dubbed the Hope District, this was the first multi-stakeholder gathering of what has been a largely fragmented, independently operated series of efforts. This event was intended to provide a space in which individual and shared dreams might emerge, and, from them, shared action.



We met at a community center in the neighborhood of family homes still alive with front-porch conversations, kids playing in the tree-lined alleys, music from the corner church and the summer hum of crickets, a beautiful place that insists on existing amid the burned down shells of houses that mar each street, left standing as sore monuments to society's brutal neglect, gutted for their copper (the largest local 'industry'), and spreading like a cancer through the neighborhood as they now house only drug addicts and the mentally ill. And we walked through a series of gardens that have been planted under one man's vision to regenerate the neighborhood, one block at a time, on our way to making a new garden, a Dream Garden, this one to become a holding space through which the vision for the future might grow by engaging a wider circle in the community to both dream it and bring it into being.



The dreams are already there in Hope District, the vision emerging, seeds and shoots growing in what is very, very hard soil. They persist, appearing slowly, one block at a time. The thing is that the houses burn down faster, and the addicts and criminals move in faster, and the deaths from shootings and fires and disease pile up faster than they can take the blocks back. There's no money to speak of, few resources, a morass of systemic obstacles that might well seem impossible to unravel. But as we walked together, listening to the story of Hope District,

what it is and wants to become, it became undeniably clear that there is, somehow, an undying hope in that community, a belief, based on love and pure faith that someday we—any of us—can dream our dreams into being. How this belief sustains in contexts like Hope District I cannot fathom; but it does. And, I think, it is this profound belief that, more than anything, will cause change, real change to emerge: it is the source of intention that persists, even in the middle of the messes we have created and allowed to fester; it is what holds open the crack that lets the light get in, even when all we see is darkness all around; and, when tapped, it is the place from which we act that can shift entire systems, to generate well being for all.



Physicist David Bohm has said that “intention is not only the most powerful force; it is the only force” in the universe. And yet, intentions often wither and die. Why? I think that a very deep belief, what my colleague, Jim Davis, refers to as “sacred purpose”, is what sustains us and our intentions, that gives us the strength to hold them no matter what we come up against, over time (and over and over again). And so when we showed up in Detroit to help, to serve, it was believing in their belief

and, indeed, in the notion that we truly can create whatever future we want, even when the systems around us seem to want to erode if not destroy that essence of who we are and want to become. And so we hold the belief—even though it might seem crazy, impossible, and especially because it is—because, at the end of the day, all the rest of it is noise, for without it we are nothing. How else can we and the people in Hope District move from fighting the block-by-block battles to winning the war, but to believe we can?

**“The warrior must know that all his acts are useless, but proceed as if he didn’t know it.”
Don Juan**

Inside-Out

The Detroit experience is only one in a series of rapidly unfolding social innovation initiatives that are occurring in many communities throughout the US and globally, each centering on whole system, cross-sector, community transformation work with ongoing support through Menlo Lab and its extended network in the SoL community. These experiences have changed me, my life, my work and ways of seeing leadership and change. It is almost a year now since I last sat down to write about my previous experiences in working with leaders in what are not only incredibly complex but often horribly brutal contexts—from the workplaces to the schools to the neighborhoods so many struggle to survive within, the emotional, physical and, yes, spiritual decay are accelerating at a rate faster than the many well-intended programs, agencies, and citizens can allay. And yet through the work that Menlo has been doing over the past several months, I find myself both in wonder and surprise at what is now emerging: openings to new ways of seeing and being, together, that stand to profoundly shift who we are and, thus, what we create in our collective systems. In the book I wrote nearly a year ago, *Inside-Out*, I began to

explore why large system change initiatives fail to address persisting “crises” in our social, economic, and ecological systems, feeling then that focus on the “exterior” structures was not enough, and that attending to the “interior” dimensions of our emotional, relational, and spiritual well being might unleash a deeper source of wisdom and strength, sufficient to allow true regeneration of our systems. For many of us, this is a fundamental shift, from trying to effect change from the “outside-in” to instead beginning from the inside, and letting that place guide what actions, structures and systems emerge on the outside. Through the Menlo Lab community work since, my belief has only deepened that the solutions to even the most complex challenges reside within us, and that they are accessed not from the head, but rather from the heart and ‘soul’. The leaders in the community systems we have been working with are sensing the power and grace of this source within us, each of us and all of us, who, together, offer a collective wisdom that does provide a deeper knowing of what is needed to effect true change, and also the belief and sheer energy needed to manifest our dreams. Through our work, we’re also learning more about what it takes to act from this deep “source”, and what leaders who embark on this journey are bumping up against along the way. What follows are some initial observations, ones that will, no doubt, continue to evolve as the work unfolds.

Admitting We’re Lost

It’s a little like AA: you start by admitting there’s a problem. Leaders everywhere, throughout the globe, are waking up to the realization that what we have been doing in our respective institutions and, especially, as interdependent players in a whole system, is just not working—particularly in the ways we tend to lead (or try to). The conditions in which we operate have changed enormously, but we have not. That this awakening is occurring from top management down through the organizations to the front lines is a really good thing—hard and even painful for many, but the “opening” through which new ways of being and leading are now emerging, in more far reaching ways than ever before.

At the same time, there is also an acknowledgement, even among the consultants and practitioners who specialize in leadership and organizational or systemic change, that we don’t yet quite know what leaders now need to become. It’s this admitting that “we don’t know what we don’t know” that is creating a space in the SoL community and many like institutions to explore the possibilities. Menlo Lab and the SoL institutional member liaison officer group are now experimenting with new leadership approaches and practices that might better serve the challenges of our times. Drawing inspiration from the work of Otto Scharmer and U-Theory, as well as from a variety of contemplative practices, the arts, and both ancient and new forms of connecting to deeper levels of individual and collective consciousness, we are paving the way for a new paradigm of leadership. While there is infinite territory to explore, application of the evolving practices in both corporate and whole community, cross-sector contexts is generating significant results in both the quality and speed at which significant transformation is occurring. Because these new practices are being developed within the community contexts, and as needed to serve their needs (as opposed to offering whatever bag of tricks one happens to have), it appears that what we co-create might offer more effective solutions than we have in the past. And yet there is so much to learn. The “lab” of Menlo and the SoL community now engaged is intended to create the spaces where we can

responsibly but freely evolve the approaches, utilizing what practices we have now that still make sense, and adapting and innovating to create what does not yet exist, to serve.

Showing Up

We know that change only really happens through the self, in Ghandi's words, that it is necessary to "be the change you want to see in the world". I often tell the leaders I work with at Nissan that leadership is really about two things: how you "show up" to "be" your dreams and aspirations, and how you "hold" them over time, especially through all the tensions that appear when the old systems and habits and ways of being are getting "let go" of, making way for the new. When leaders accept the power of this, their first reaction is often fear—showing up in ways that are "being the change" is true accountability, true freedom to create, yet, with it enormous responsibility. Many leaders I have worked with, even at the top levels of management, balk at this realization. The choice then becomes whether to step up and "show up", or not; it is the turning point where true leaders emerge from the rest, regardless of hierarchical or other formal constructs of power.

The ability to "show up" requires a measure of personal work, to connect to the deep source of one's own dreams, aspirations, intentions. For many, space for individual reflection about what one loves and aspires to create can be accessed fairly easily, and the bigger challenge is in summoning the will to "show up" through action (often easier said than done). For others, however, particularly those in systems where the nature and duration of the "crises" they encounter is extreme, dreams can be almost painfully hard to access, and the possibility of finding them seemingly very, very small. For some in these types of brutal contexts, belief itself has died, and with it, their very being; they become like ghosts, disappeared. The nature of the work then becomes about making spaces where the individuals and the community can "reappear", to believe in dreams again, as well as in themselves as the ones who can manifest them, if they choose. Until this work is done, "showing up" is little more than a body in a chair, a couple of hands to turn the gears on a machine that can only do the same things over, and over, and over again, until it stops. Nothing and no one grows in such a place. With time, love, and holding the belief on behalf of those who can't, emergence is possible; and so we hold and wait.

Coming Out of the Woods, Into the Garden

The act of "showing up" is like coming out of a deep, dark forest, one where everyone is stumbling around looking for The Path that will lead them to whatever destination they have in mind—the "garden" that will somehow miraculously bear the fruits of their dreams—and then awakening to the fact that at the edge of the forest is only a vast, empty space to fill. Of course, there is no one path, (at least not one that can be navigated successfully through the complex and unpredictable world we live in), and no one leader who can come up with all that is needed to get out of the "woods". And a meadow untended will likely only produce a lot of weeds.

At Nissan and the Menlo Lab community contexts, the metaphor for leading in complex adaptive systems has become co-creation of a garden, at first an empty meadow, but one full of infinite possibility that those who have the aspiration and courage to leave the

woods can begin to cultivate, bringing their dreams as seeds that can manifest the future they want. The hitch is that what emerges in the garden cannot come from a fixed plan, a grand design, or from 'above'. Confronted with the void and only themselves to dream new realities into being, this realization drives many would-be leaders back into the "woods". And yet, in order for systems to draw from the wisdom of many, to evolve organically and in harmony with the many complex forces at play, the "garden" needs to emerge over time, as new ideas take seed and sprout up. While there is usually need for a boundary (like a purpose or intention) that contains the nature of what is planted and nurtured in the garden, the container defines only the "why", and leaves open the "what" and "how". This open space approach allows for a high degree of innovation, pure creation, and an ongoing cycle of renewal; and, it also is messy and frightening to some. When the old hard structures are removed, those very systems that created the illusion of safety and control, and all that's left is the empty space to fill in, and again true accountability occurs. While some leaders find themselves running back into the woods, others dig deeper and embrace the joy of creation. The work then becomes about tending to who and what have ventured into the meadow, and holding the space for those who have yet to come.

Following the Energy

When the first leaders step out of the woods to sow their seeds in the garden, it is important to nurture them, to focus attention and intention on what is wanting to grow even as the whole system has not yet emerged. While sensing the system as an emerging whole is very critical, it is as important to notice and "follow" the energy that appears first. It is this energy that can inspire others in the system to come out of the woods, that generates deeper confidence in the ability to make real change, and that expands the energy from what may only be a few at first to a wider circle of players. Good energy, like bad, is contagious. Allowing the energy to spread organically, and noticing where and to whom it travels, allows the creation of social networks that can operate both within and outside of formal structures, to do what is needed. As new 'crops' are planted in the garden and others mature or die and are replaced, the energy shifts, forming new social networks and giving rise to new leaders, while sometimes letting go of the old. Leadership can and must move in harmony with the energy that arises from dreams and aspirations as they emerge; otherwise, you get stasis, and the system will die.

Following the energy in this organic way is also difficult for many, especially because the greatest sources of energy are often either outside of or in lower levels of hierarchical management structures. Leaders at the "top" of the organization are then required to recast their roles, from decision-makers or would-be visionaries to those who tend more to the soil: by being the change that is wanted and supporting new ways of being in others; by creating a sense of safety that allows others to come out of the woods (and feel free to run back in temporarily, when they need to) and, in some contexts, to even dream to begin with; and then, above all, by holding the dreams and the belief they can manifest, especially when others can no longer believe.

Dealing with Shadow

The things we bump up against when “coming out of the woods, into the garden” are often referred to as our “shadow”. Shadow is the sum of what may be fears, self-doubts, wounds leftover from the past that can limit our identities and, also, when we are conscious of it, that can provide the best ‘teachers’. We all have some degree of shadow, and, in most groups, regardless of the context, it usually shows up—sometimes subtly as a dip in energy or a closing to possibility, and other times quite overtly, and in ways that, when not tended to, can cause a lot of damage in both relationships and group progress.

While there are many approaches for dealing with individual and collective shadow, what seems important to remember is that what produces shadow is light. To hold shadow lightly, with compassion and even love, is to transmute it, so we can sense what is wanting to emerge underneath, the light that shines from our dreams of wanting to be and become. Thus, while dealing with shadow can be very challenging, it can also provide the “opening” through which we access what it is we most need and want to create, just another place from which dreams can emerge.

Holding Space

Dreams, whether easy or hard to come by, like any garden, need lots of tending, or else they wither and die. The tensions inherent in any change, where the old must give way to the new, can be really tough to take, even dangerous in many community systems. How do we hold onto belief in the face of our own fears and doubts? How do we hold belief for others who have either not yet found it for themselves or lose it along the way? These are the central questions for leaders in complex systems today. Unless we learn how to answer them, no real change will ever completely manifest, bear the fruits we dreamed of.



Luckily, when leadership is shared, no one person has to hold the space alone, or all the time. With the leaders from Nissan to the communities in Detroit and Los Angeles, we have begun the practice of intentionally creating holding spaces, of forming the bonds and the agreements needed to share both the delight and the burden, to watch for when someone is struggling, and be ready to stand up in his or her place, to hold the space as long as it is needed. A sense of true community and very deep, lasting bonds emerge when this sharing is embraced. Then, the whole is really greater than any one of us alone.

Growing the Garden

Growing a “garden”, and in a way that all can not only survive but thrive within, like anything, requires a lot of love and care, a few good tools, and the discipline for sustaining it over time. For the systems in which we all live and work, the love part is easy—it is there, so very present. The tools, as I said, are evolving. A few are documented in my book, and many others that have

been developed by the Menlo Lab network since are available, open source. The discipline for sustaining the work—and in the all the joyous and painful and lovely and messy ways it unfolds—is the really hard part, it seems. Thankfully, we have each other.

For more about the practices that Menlo Lab is evolving, please feel free to write to me at: tracyhuston@ca.rr.com . To keep up with what the SoL institutional member community is evolving, through Menlo and the related New Leadership Paradigm and Hastily-formed Networks (HFN) groups, please check back on the SoL website at www.solonline.org , or reach out to a SoL member. For information about Jim Davis' work, see www.sacredleadership.org .

Bio: Tracy Huston, Consultant

Tracy has been supporting large system change and organizational performance since 1988. She is the Founder of Menlo Lab, a network of practitioners and consultants from business, government, and civic groups engaged in supporting whole community transformation. She joined Nissan in 2002 to design their first global executive development program for high-potential leaders, in support of succession and organizational learning objectives. Tracy recently returned to her consulting practice, focusing on leadership development and executive coaching in support of personal and systemic transformation. She continues to support Nissan's executive program through workshop facilitation and coaching, and is Nissan's Liaison Officer to the Society for Organizational Learning (SoL). She is a member of the design team for the SoL-MIT cross-sector innovation project, Emerging Leaders for Innovation Across Systems. Her work has been published in the SoL *Reflections* journal, and her book, *Inside-Out: Stories and Methods for Generating the Collective Will to Create the Future We Want*, was published by SoL in early 2007.