

Riding the Winds of Change with Transformational Thinking

Recently, on a beautiful summer evening something interesting happened as my family was sitting on our front porch enjoying the pleasant weather. My husband was the first to notice it. In the distance he could see a rainbow-colored hot air balloon floating across the clear blue sky. As we watched intently, we realized that the balloon was gradually coming closer and closer to us. Soon we realized that not only was the balloon coming towards us, but it appeared as though it was going to land. At the same time, we noticed vehicle after vehicle beginning to converge upon our neighborhood. Those of us who lived in the area started to follow quickly in anticipation to see if the balloon was really going to make its descent. As we rounded the corner of the next block, we could see that the beautiful balloon had landed in a clearing. The pilot proceeded to take some of the excited spectators up for a ride in his majestic vessel. This was a magical experience I will never forget. Young and old together flocked to the scene in eager excitement to be a part of this out-of-the-ordinary experience. As I think about this event, I can't help but to relate it to the Communities of the Future (COTF) System of Community Transformation. In this new millennium, we are starting to see balloons of change in the distance heading in our direction with increased speed and intensity. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could greet these changes upon the horizon with excitement and anticipation, rather than fear and trepidation? While preparing for an era of continuous change can seem overwhelming, it is absolutely necessary for us to develop the skills and cultivate the type of thinking which will help our communities survive and flourish. The tools of the COTF System can prepare us to embrace change with less fear and more of an attitude reminiscent of the excitement and wonder of a wide-eyed child discovering something new.

The 21st Century Pinwheel of Human Survival

As we reflect on the times when we personally have descended into chaos, we can notice

that when it ends, we emerge changed, stronger in some ways, new. We have held in us the dance of creation and learned that growth always requires passage through the fearful realms of disintegration.

-----Margaret J. Wheatley

Rick Smyre, president of the Center for Communities of the Future, has identified twelve categorical areas which will challenge human survival in the coming decades, which collectively he calls “The 21st Century Pinwheel of Human Survival.” The areas include: (1) energy, (2) the limits of democracy, (3) global warming, (4) new diseases, (5) changing demographics, (6) reduction in biodiversity, (7) technological singularity, (8) cognitive complexity and continuous innovation, (9) clashing civilizations and terrorism, (10) three economies in churn, (11) possible disappearance of national borders, and (12) emergence of artificial intelligence. How do we even begin to prepare for such sweeping changes to life as we know it? Resisting change is human nature and may seem to work temporarily, but in the long-run will not be an effective strategy. So how do we overcome our fear of change and successfully transition into an age characterized by uncertainty? In order to prepare for these transformative changes, we must first be *personally* transformed. This means shifting our paradigms to accept new concepts such as parallel processes, listening for value, appropriate questions, futures generative dialogue, and connective thinking. But before we can begin to make a shift in our thinking, we must first examine our beliefs.

Belief Systems and “The Truth”

Let’s take a moment to understand how we develop our belief systems, or what we believe to be “the truth” we hold about ourselves, other people, the world, and our circumstances. In the book *The Self-Talk Solution*, Shad Helmstetter presents an analogy between our mind and a record. He states:

We are all born with a nice, clean, shiny record on which nothing else has ever been recorded. As soon as we’re born, the needle comes down on our record and starts cutting grooves in the record. With each passing day, every word we hear and thought we think, about every experience we have, cuts a groove in the

record. The words and thoughts are repeated over and over again until the grooves become deeper and more permanent. The deeper, more permanent grooves represent our conditioned-in beliefs and attitudes we have about ourselves, other people, and the world.

Why am I so interested in how we develop our belief systems? Because before our communities can truly be transformed, we must understand what it means to be transformed on a personal level. Only when our paradigms change, will our organizations, communities, and society be capable of meaningful change. It starts with how we think. Our thinking reflects how we will respond to the circumstances in our lives. Our responses in word and action, in turn, will play an incredibly important role in determining the future of our communities.

Understanding the origin of beliefs is understanding how the mind works. The human mind is susceptible to suggestion, and is very prone to hypnotic suggestions and commands. Repetition of statements and images over time can become fixed beliefs. The belief system of an individual will determine his perception of reality. These beliefs are the foundation of the individual's behavior, choices, feelings, images, and literally, the major part of the ego of the personality. People are highly susceptible to self-hypnosis. Ask yourself a question and see how fast the mind suggests an answer. The mind will answer any and every question. We also tend to let whomever we consider to be the "experts" in our hierarchical society mold our belief systems.

Just today on the news I heard of a concern over a possible suicide pact between middle school students in Lincoln, Nebraska, sparked by the suicide of a thirteen-year-old a few weeks ago. According to students the pact spanned across several middle schools in the city. Surely many factors are at play in a situation like this, but I can't help but wonder if a contributing factor could be a society so doggedly attached to rugged individualism. We are so focused on status, achievement, and accumulation of wealth, when ultimately we are striving for something more intangible in our lives....meaning. It is estimated that since the 1950s depression among children has increased by 1000% and teen suicide by 300%. If we don't want to see these numbers grow exponentially, we need to start providing our children with opportunities to see the meaning in their lives

and provide some real hope for the future.

Researchers have examined the role of individuality and connectedness in the development of identity. Developmentalist Catherine Cooper and her colleagues have demonstrated that the presence of an atmosphere that promotes both individuality and connectedness is important in the adolescent's identity development. Individuality consists of two dimensions: self-assertion, the ability to have and communicate a point of view; and separateness, the use of communication patterns to express how one is different from others. A connectedness also consists of two dimensions: mutuality, sensitivity to and respect for others views; and permeability, openness to others' views. Cooper's research findings reveal that identity formation is enhanced by relationships that are both individuated and connected. In addition, Stuart Hauser and his associates have also identified processes that promote the adolescent's identity development. They have found that people who use enabling behaviors (such as explaining, accepting, and giving empathy) facilitate identity development more than those who exhibit constraining behaviors (such as judging and devaluing.)

A World of Dynamic Interconnectedness

The Communities of the Future System of Community Transformation was created to prepare our communities for a new type of society - a society in which radical individualism will not be the norm. Principles of community transformation include the idea of "collaborative connectedness." The concept of "connected individuality" reflects the need to build mature individual capacities at the same time one connects in deeper, authentic relationships with others. "Connected individuality" will help us succeed in a world characterized by dynamic interconnectedness. Community transformation is all about listening for value. In addition, the ability to transform our communities will be dependent upon our ability to be open to new ideas. In an interdependent society, we must go beyond enlightened self-interest and learn multiple methods to help each other succeed, in essence, work for the common good. By working together for the common good, we can start to bring meaning back into our lives, and help raise humanity to a higher level.

We can begin to personally prepare for the future by learning to think in new

ways. Here are some suggestions to help us adjust and ultimately prosper in a dynamic integral society: (1) Develop a practice of introspection, and become conscious of what you believe and why. (2) Keep an open mind, and learn to become aware when your mind is “closing down.” (3) Recognize defensiveness as an attempt to keep new insights from entering your mind. (4) Learn to recognize when you are being influenced by a pattern of fear. (5) Detach from values that support the belief system that success means achieving certain goals in life. Be flexible enough to adjust to changing circumstances and begin viewing your life in a nonlinear manner, as a process. (6) Act on your intuition, and give up your need for “proof” that your inner guidance is correct. (7) When planning for the future, learn to trust what you cannot see (hidden patterns, unobvious connections, unseen forces, etc.) far more than what is in plain sight. (8) Remember that we can influence, but not control, what will happen tomorrow.

In *After the Clockwork Universe*, S.J. Goerner discusses synergetic economic webs. Synergetic economic webs are a type of co-evolving mutualism. They are based on reciprocal relationships. When such relationships are relatively equal, they create a fine-grained weave with intelligence spread throughout the web. Synergistic self-interest is pursued in conjunction with the wellbeing of the larger whole. There is an awareness that the health of the whole is important to everyone. Integrity is an important component of the system. Competition takes the form of a game in which all strive to put forth the best. It is not war, empire-building, or a zero-sum game. Rather, in synergistic webs putting forth one’s own innovative contribution is likely to help others as well as oneself. Synergistic webs tend to increase everyone’s wellbeing relatively equally. Instead of a few people getting massively wealthy, everyone in the system tends to go up and down together.

The Challenge

Many of our beliefs that developed as a result of the 18th century Scottish Enlightenment and supported us through the Industrial Age, will not sustain us in a Knowledge Economy and emerging Web/Networked Economy. In a world that is constantly changing, interconnected, and increasingly complex, an individual cannot be viewed as a separate entity, but must be seen as part of reality that is continuously

evolving. When all members of a community are invited to work together to create a shared vision, the participation of a diverse group representative of the whole system can provide an array of perspectives and set the stage for the emergence of richer results. It is the process of participation that makes a plan come alive to people. They will commit themselves to a project or cause if it has real meaning to them. The Center for Communities of the Future envisions a society of this type that is based on co-creating and in which people recognize and appreciate their mutual dependence. By working together, and becoming cognizant of future trends and processes, we will be able to successfully progress into the future and help sculpt a society in which our descendants will enjoy living and have the opportunity to make their own unique contributions to an ever-evolving world. Like the awe-inspiring hot air balloon that adorned the skies of my community that warm summer day, I believe if we embrace the concepts of community transformation, we will be able to rise above the most challenging circumstances and begin to flow gracefully with the winds of change.