The Braided Way: Deep democracy and Empowerment Design Tools for Sustainability

Gillian Emslie
Findhorn Community, Scotland
gill.emslie@findhorn.cc

Video of conference presentation: http://youtu.be/08kroEVqLD0

Abstract

We are living in times of a convergence of crises[1] that calls for systemic solutions. Individually and collectively, human beings have amazing depths of capacity and ingenuity and we need to encourage approaches that tap into these inherent resources if we are to turn current global trends in a more sustainable direction. Effective, deep communication is essential to facilitate this process of change and can lead to the creation of resilient communities and organisations that strengthen the inner capacities of the individuals and their part in the whole.

This paper is based on heuristic PhD research, which investigates using *Processwork,* an awareness based practice developed by Drs Arnold & Amy Mindell and colleagues, as an effective method for creating systemic solutions. Processwork is a multi-dimensional, process-orientated and interdisciplinary approach. Its philosophical roots draw from Jungian Psychology, Taoism, Physics, Shamanism and Systems Thinking. In the research this paradigm is used as a lens to evaluate the facilitation of a shift in perspective, consciousness, or meta-design. It is used as a way of becoming aware of the underlying assumptions and belief systems that inform our perceptions and thoughts. Processwork is a trans-disciplinary, systemic approach that values the inner experience of individuals. It highlights 'awareness' and suggests a language and a process that tracks the flow of subtle and overt, local and non-local communication signals. Consciousness can then be deconstructed and explored in terms of awareness of these signals, roles, dimensions of rank and power, belief systems, (or edges) and phenomenological experience within an analytical structure of deep democracy and eldership.

Data was gathered from case studies, interviews with practitioners and participants, relevant texts and field experiences with: The Findhorn Foundation Community; other members of the Global Ecovillage Network in Europe and Latin America; NGOs; grassroots and indigenous community leaders; the judicial system in northern Spain; and self-reflection of my own experience as a researcher in these contexts. In choosing such a broad spectrum of applications, I hope to highlight the contribution of applied Processwork in diverse cultural and social contexts.

***

The research has clearly illustrated that there is a deep longing for sustainable, resilient communities and organisations emerging across the world. Paul Hawkins speaks eloquently about this in his book *Blessed Unrest,* where he describes the self-organising, non-local 'movement' of hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of organisations working towards ecological sustainability and social justice.[1]

This 'movement' seems to have arisen in response to the increasingly fragmented structure of today's society and the consequent impact on the biodiversity of the Earth's ecosystems, all driven by the predominant paradigm of social and economic development. However, despite the overwhelming body of evidence, "the predominant paradigm of social and economic development remains largely oblivious to the risk of human-induced ecological disasters at continental to planetary scales." [2] In 2012, Kate Raworth of Oxfam in her report, 'A Safe and Just Space for Humanity: Can we live within the doughnut?',[3] points out that we are currently in breach of eight of the eleven social boundaries required for a safe and just world. These include food, water, equity, resilience and having a vote, and in particular, access to food and gender equality. Raworth argues that "any vision of sustainable development for the 21st Century must recognise that eradicating poverty and achieving social justice must be addressed within the boundaries of our Earth's ecosystem." [4]

It is clear that this situation is contributing to the destabilising of many individuals, families, communities, organisations and in some case entire nations, that now find themselves facing a shortfall in their basic needs, equity and social justice.

Donella Meadows and her fellow authors already pointed to this trend in their book, *Limits to Growth* (1974),[5] which showed clearly, from a systemic perspective, how these unsustainable patterns, if unrestrained, could create chaos on a global scale, seriously damaging the ecosystems and social systems that support life on earth. Over forty years later, in 2013, we can see many examples that clearly illustrate this trend. Water scarcity is perhaps one of the most concerning as 1.2 billion people already live in areas of water scarcity, and another 1.6 billion face 'economic water shortage'.[6] With population growth, climate change and inefficient use of existing resources it is estimated that by 2025, 1.8 billion people will be living with absolute water scarcity.[7] Michael Renner of the authoritative WorldWatch Institute suggests, "For reasons that range from warfare and persecution to natural disasters and development projects, an estimated 92.56 million people were forcibly displaced in 2012,

[1] Hawken, P. (2007) *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Movement in the World Came into Being and Why No One Saw It Coming*, New York: Viking.
[2] Stern. N. (2007) *The Economics of Climate Change – The Stern Review*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.
[3] See: www.oxfam.org/en/grow/policy/safe-and-just-space-humanity
[4] Short Circuit: The Lifecycle of our Electronic Gadgets and the True Cost to Earth (2013) www.gaiafoundation.org
[5] Meadows, D., Meadows, D., & Randers, J. (1974). *Limits to Growth* (2nd ed.). Universe Books.
[6] UN, "Water for Life 2005-2015: Water Scarcity," at www.un.org/waterforlifedecade/scarcity.shtml , viewed 20 February 2013
[7] Ibid.

either inside their home countries or across a border. Displacement is sometimes temporary, but in other cases it can last for years".[1]

In the context of this deeply disturbing data and the increasing need for a large-scale coherent and effective response, I describe here some of the research that I have done, primarily in the area of social change, to examine how to shift our perspective or the lenses through which we perceive our world and our lives. I examine how we could awaken human consciousness to the current situation, and bring awareness to the worldviews that drive the current social and economic development trends described above: within the individual; in our relationships; and, within and between organisations and governance bodies.

It seems clear that the current worldviews, belief systems and consequent attitudes, which dominate our collective approach to life, are based on fragmented and reductionist belief systems and that if we are to pursue a long term sustainable future we need a perceptual shift from fragmentation to holism.

> There is nothing unusual in the idea of life on Earth interacting with the air, sea and rocks, but it took a view from outside to glimpse the possibility that this combination might consist of a single giant living system and one with the capacity to keep the Earth always at a state most favourable for the life upon it.[2]   James Lovelock

> When you understand the power of system self-organization, you begin to understand why biologists worship biodiversity even more than economists worship technology. The wildly varied stock of DNA, evolved and accumulated over billions of years, is the source of evolutionary potential, just as science libraries and labs and universities where scientists are trained are the source of technological potential. Allowing species to go extinct is a systems crime, just as randomly eliminating all copies of particular science journals, or particular kinds of scientists, would be. The same could be said of human cultures, of course ……. Insistence on a single culture shuts down learning. Cuts back resilience. Any system, biological, economic, or social, that becomes so encrusted that it cannot self-evolve, a system that systematically scorns experimentation and wipes out the raw material of innovation, is doomed over the long term on this highly variable planet.[3]
> Donella Meadows

These quotes highlight the importance of respecting bio-cultural diversity and the ability to glimpse our reality from the outside as key components of designing a more sustainable path into the future. I propose that the current situation is essentially a design problem, based on a fragmented worldview, and consequently lacking the essential emphasis on **the importance of relationship** or **interconnection between the parts** of this complex living system. Daniel Wahl, in his PhD *Design for Human and Planetary Health[4]*, frames this clearly:

> Design is an expression of intention in and through relationships and interactions. The basic intention behind the sustainability revolution is to provide a meaningful and humane existence for every local and global citizen within the limits set by the natural processes that maintain the health of ecosystems and the biosphere for this and future generations of life on earth……….Sustainability is not a fixed state to work towards and

---

[1] Renner, M. (2013) *Number of Displaced People Rises*, WorldWatch Institute Web site, http://vitalsigns.worldwatch.org/trends/population-society, accessed 20/8/13
[2] Lovelock, J., Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth, 2000
[3] Meadows D., Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System, 1999
[4] Wahl D., Design for Human and Planetary Health, 2006, p.1

ultimately achieve, it is rather the continuous process of learning by which local, regional, national and international communities learn to participate appropriately and therefore sustainably in natural process – both at the local and the global scale.

Arnold Mindell, in his latest book, *Dance of the Ancient One,*[1] also speaks to the need for a paradigm shift, with a universal interdisciplinary approach, if we are to resolve these complex individual and global issues. Mindell, as does Meadows in her quote above, highlights the need for a *global system mind,*[2] or access to the organising intelligence that has the capacity to self organise and maintain balance. If we are all then part of this *single giant living system,* then access to this global system mind or self organising system must not only be 'out there'. Joanna Macy in *Mutual Causality in Buddhism and General Systems Theory* explains:

> Because the open system is self-organising, its behaviour cannot be dictated or directly modified from without. External pressures or circumstances can only operate in interaction with internal organisation. Past experience, as recorded in the system, is fed back into the making of present decision.[3]

In this light Mindell suggests that although effective leadership based on these principals is needed, each one of us also needs to develop the ability to facilitate our relationship with the whole, and learn to resolve conflicts inner and outer. He posits that this is relatively simple – all we need to do is to be able to identify the two, or more, sides of the conflict, find a degree of detachment from these and encourage all sides to express themselves fully, thereby finding the essence of all that is needed for the well being of the whole. This sounds simple – but how to do it? In practice, how can we develop the ability to self-reflect, cultivate the detachment or meta-view and perspective needed to facilitate positive change and not simply continue reacting unconsciously to inner and outer disturbances?

From the philosophy of a systems perspective, self-reflexive consciousness (i.e. the ability to self-reflect from a meta-position) emerges when a sufficient degree of complexity has evolved to require a selection or choice between different courses of action. When awareness is brought to this process through cultivating a more detached meta-position that can reflect on all parts of the experience, or all voices, this facilitates diversity and an ability to see more clearly the information arising in the system as part of the process that is emerging. This is very different from our experience when perceived though the lens of our personal and cultural belief systems and unconsciously letting the past or cultural belief systems dictate how we respond or react. How then do we design the conditions necessary for this shift in perspective?

In this paper, I describe research I have conducted, using the tools of applied Processswork informed by the underpinning philosophy and multi-dimensional framework of deep democracy, in various communities around the world. This approach facilitates individual, group and societal capacity for systemic awareness. Over the past few years I have had the opportunity to work alongside innovative leaders of grassroots organisations in South East Asia and Latin America. In these different parts of the world I have consistently met a spirit of

---

[1] Mindell, A., Dance of the Ancient One, 2013
[2] Mindell, A., Dance of the Ancient One, 2013, p4
[3] Macy, J., Mutual Causality in Buddhism and General Systems Theory, 1991, p174

generosity, fearless determination, love and commitment to the freedom from oppression and the right to dignity for all. These experiences have filled me with hope and love for the world. It is this spirit, which continually draws me back to these lesser known (to Western eyes) regions of the world.

Grassroots Leadership Training, in Myanmar, 2010 (left) and Thailand, 2011 (right)

Processwork, an awareness practise, is rooted deeply in the belief that underlying our experience is an *informing pattern*, which connects the relationships we have with ourselves, others, and the world around us, and that by bringing awareness to this pattern or *field* we can transform ourselves and our immediate environment. One of the central challenges in facilitating awareness of this perspective is an apparent dichotomy, often experienced as social tension or conflict between the dominant paradigm and transcendent, radical or marginalised views which seek to shift the cultural norms. This highlights the need for new frameworks and a language that can frame the complexity and multileveled nature of this challenge.

Process Orientated movement training, Barcelona, 2012

During this research I used Arnold Mindell's multi-dimensional map of reality encompassing the Consensus Reality, the measurable and quantifiable dimension, the Dreaming or subjective, more feeling, dimension of reality and the essence level – which ultimately points to the non dual dimension of reality which David Bohm termed *unbroken wholeness,* the

shamans of Mexico called *the Nagual,* and in some religious settings might be known as God or the Divine source. Connection with this dimension, while un-measurable in quantifiable terms, none the less seems to provide an important sense of meaning or orientation at a deep level for many. Mindell coined a phrase *deep democracy*, which encompasses this multi-dimensional perspective. This framework and metaskill[1] can be extremely helpful in framing and working with this apparent dichotomy.

Deep democracy is a universal metaskill, which reframes the Democracy paradigm:

> We have frequently printed the word Democracy, yet I cannot too often repeat that it is a word the real gist of which still sleeps, quite un-awakened, notwithstanding the resonance and the many angry tempests out of which its syllables have come, from pen or tongue. It is a great word, whose history, I suppose, remains unwritten, because that history has yet to be enacted.   Walt Whitman, Democratic Vistas, 1871

Deep democracy is not only a political program, but also a way of working with people, a feeling skill, or "metaskill" as Amy Mindell calls such skills. After many seminars in the '80s, Arnold Mindell's term, Deep democracy, first appeared in book form in his, 1992/2000 work, *The Leader as Martial Artist: An Introduction to Deep democracy, Techniques and Strategies for Resolving Conflict and Creating Community*. Deep democracy is a psycho-social-political paradigm and methodology.

> Unlike 'classical' democracy, which focuses on majority rule, Deep democracy suggests that all voices, states of awareness, and frameworks of reality are important. Deep democracy also suggests that the information carried within these voices, awarenesses, and frameworks are all needed to understand the complete process of the system. Deep democracy is an attitude that focuses on the awareness of voices that are both central and marginal.[2]

The primary research was carried out through a combination of case studies, interviews and conversations with a variety of participants in a series of seminars run between 2009 and 2013 in a variety of grassroots and Non Governmental Organisations (NGO), leadership training programmes, management team dynamics and inter-organisational collaboration, and relationship building processes, in Europe, Latin America and South East Asia. My aim is to highlight the contribution of applied Processwork and Deep democracy as design tools that can facilitate more sustainable relationships in diverse cultural and social contexts.

Within all of these programmes the key crosscutting themes have been ethnic, cultural and religious diversity, social justice, gender equity, climate change, and the impact of the socio-economic and political situation in those regions. It is a compelling setting in which to work. These insights are based on the written and verbal feedback of the participants, as well as my own impressions. Clearly, these impressions are somewhat subjective, but interestingly, feedback from different contexts is often very consistent.

---

[1] The meta-quality, or feeling behind the use of a skill. The "way" you say something or do something is a metaskill which can be harsh, helpful, compassionate, playful, scientific etc.

[2] Siver, S., *Processwork and the Facilitation of Conflict*, 2006, p 44.

For many participants the emphasis on inner work, eldership,[1] developing the participant facilitator,[2] the understanding of the three dimensions of reality and the permission to give voice to not only our own inner critics,[3] but also the 'ghosts'[4] or unoccupied roles in the 'field'[5] and allowing for the facilitation of inner and outer diversity issues, are the key concepts that consistently receive positive feedback. The signal based awareness practise, awareness of the dynamics of rank, power and privilege and the skills to connect deeply with the useful essence in what disturbs us, and how this is often the meta-skill, or feeling attitude that we need to deal with that very disturbance, is in many cases transformative.

Learning the skills to connect deeply with the useful 1%, or essence, of a difficulty, whether that be an inner critic, or outer disturbance involves accurately tracking and unfolding subtle signals. Although as long as two or three days are sometimes spent working on this process, it would often feel very relieving for the participants when they started to experience the shift within themselves, and in some cases see how this could be the meta-skill (or deeper attitude) needed for addressing the initial difficulty. This process is akin to shamanism or homeopathic thinking, where taking, or injecting, a tiny amount of what is making us ill acts as an antidote, or resonates in such a way that it somehow meets, confronts or neutralises the energy of the opponent.

Another realisation for many was that we often have a group process going on within us. The pressure to present ourselves as a consolidated front, or a single unified voice, often leads to internal paralysis, or feeling stuck between points of view, and so we end up saying or doing nothing, or getting depressed or overwhelmed. Becoming aware of what we choose to marginalise or include in our 'reality' is often also an 'aha!' moment which facilitates insight and perspective, relieving an atmosphere of inner and outer tension, bringing awareness to the situation and consequently deepening relationships and understanding of 'difference', seeing that at a deeper level, 'other', is also 'self'.

Knowing this process within myself, I was also able to share personal examples to illustrate this and many of the other key learning points. There is so much resonance with these kinds of experiences, that even in a culture that seems so different to my own, it is humbling to realise how similar we all are, and amazing to experience this depth of understanding and mutual empathy for the human condition and the process of becoming aware.

---

[1] Eldership: an attitude of support and caring for the well being and diversity of viewpoints of a group or community

[2] In WW, the concept of leader and facilitator is understood basically as a shared role. Therefore the old concept of participant changed, we call the new participant or "citizen" a "participant facilitator." (just as the leader/facilitator is leader-follower etc.)

[3] An archetype, or an anthropomorphized role or viewpoint, e.g., inner child or inner critic, the one who says you are not good enough, you will never be able to do that..

[4] Ghosts or Ghost roles: A role in a field which is unoccupied (no one is representing or expressing the role) but which is nonetheless felt to be present, e.g., a black man entering an all white business club may feel the racism even though no one is doing anything blatantly racist at the moment—racism is often a ghost.

[5] An emotional atmosphere or a felt sense of a particular shared consciousness that seems to be transmitted by acausal non-Newtonian means.

In conclusion

To sustain vibrant relationship we need to cultivate a more deeply democratic perspective or quality of *eldership*. This will enable us to sit in the midst of the heat of the moment and facilitate, embracing diversity with a degree of detachment and fluidity. This seems central to the facilitation skills needed in the world today. This type of awareness and perspective are essential if we are to facilitate change processes that address the systemic crises we, and the future generations are and will be facing.

> Deep democracy, or the elder's multileveled awareness is typified by a special feeling; accepting the simultaneous importance of all voices and roles, and the three levels of experience. Everyday reality and its problems are as important as those problems and figures reflected in dreamland, and are also as important as any potential oneness or spiritual experience at the essence level of reality where rank no longer exists.[1]

As I understand it now, this shift is also informed by a self-organising principle, which is teleological in nature and can organise all of our individual and collective experience. Raising awareness is at the heart of this practice and the consequent deepening of our ability to self-reflect and connect with a sense of intention, and deeper meaning then informs all our decisions, individual and collective. I suspect that it can be a life long journey to become aware of the ingrained personal and cultural patterns of behaviour and the belief systems that influence all of our relationships. Sometimes, the insights or signals that show the next step or choice are unexpected, irrational and synchronistic, requiring us to develop what is known in some cultures as second attention an – to be able to pick up the subtle signals that catch our attention. For example, in a dream that I had just before I started this research project, I found myself in the desert. Everything was very still, like a living snapshot 'sparkling with lucidness'. Standing on the Australian red earth, a local friend was 'smoking me in' and a profound sense of the timeless nature of dreamtime and vibrant presence of life filled me. It felt like a clear sign to continue with this project focused on eldership, earth wisdom and the importance of relationship with the web of life itself of which we are all part.

Bibliography

Hawken, P. (2007) *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Movement in the World Came into Being and Why No One Saw It Coming*, New York: Viking.

Lovelock, J. (2000). *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth.*

Macy, J. (2007). *World as Lover, World as Self.* Berkeley, California, United States: Parallax Press.

Macy, J. (1991). *Mutual Causality in Buddhism and General Systems Theory: The Dharma of Living Systems.* Suny Press, New York.

1 Mindell, A., http://www.aamindell.net/category/ww/deep-democracy-terms/ 31.07.2013

Meadows, D. H. (2008). *Thinking in Systems.* United States of America: Chelsea Green Publishing Company.

Meadows, D. (1999). *Places to Intervene in a System*. United States of America: The Sustainability Institute

Meadows, D., Meadows, D., & Randers, J. (1974). *Limits to Growth* (2nd ed.). Universe Books.

Mindell, A. (2013). *Dance of the Ancient One.* United States of America: Deep democracy Exchange, Portland, Oregon.

Sibaud, P. (2013). Co-authored by The Gaia Foundation. Short Circuit: The Lifecycle of our Electronic Gadgets and the True Cost to Earth.

Siver, S., (2006) *Processwork and the Facilitation of Conflict* (PhD Thesis) Union Institute & University, Cincinnati, Ohio.

Wahl D. (2006). *Design for Human and Planetary Health,* PhD dissertation, University of Dundee.

Witman, W. (1871). *Democratic Vistas.* United States of America: University of Virginia

Gill Emslie is a process orientated organisational consultant, trainer and coach focusing on issues of leadership, peace building and conflict facilitation. She teaches internationally in diverse settings ranging from the NGO and social/environmental justice sector, to business and local government – facilitating in-depth training programmes and working directly with leadership teams. She is currently a PhD student living at Findhorn. Gill has also spent several years living and working with indigenous people in remote areas, which has awoken in her a particular love for bio-cultural diversity and concern about its current predicament.