

WHAT IS TRANSFORMATION?

AND HOW IT ADVANCES SOCIAL CHANGE

by Robert Gass

EXPLORATION 1.0



social change

presence

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results

collaboration

liberation

WHAT IS TRANSFORMATION?

Surrendering to an irresistible inner urging, one day the caterpillar begins to shed its skin. Revealed within is the hard protective shell that becomes the creature's home, prison and womb for the change to come. This initiates one of nature's miracles—the transformation from an immobile chrysalis whose only defense is camouflage—to a breathtakingly beautiful winged aviator we call “butterfly.”

This metamorphosis is the classic example of transformation. Transformation is profound, fundamental change, altering the very nature of something. Transformational change is both radical and sustainable. Something that is transformed can never go back to exactly what it was before.

Those of us who work for Progressive social change believe that our society needs transformation. We may campaign for specific targets: more jobs, better education and health care, an end to racial profiling, particular environmental protections, etc. But important as these are, we see them as symptoms of deeper issues: democracy at risk of corporate domination, social and economic structures that marginalize entire communities, and a society dangerously out of balance with the natural world.

In order to effect social transformation, many of us perceive that we also need a

transformation in the way we work for change. While our existing methods of leadership, institution-building, coalitions, organizing, and campaigning have yielded important victories over the years, many social indicators are moving in the wrong direction. If we simply keep on doing what we've been doing, the truth is we are not on a trajectory to creating a just society nor meeting the threats to our environment. Albert Einstein said, “The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.”

Over the last decade, a diverse network of activists, funders, trainers and consultants has stepped up to address this challenge: how to birth a transformational approach to leadership, organizational development, and movement building with the aim of helping our social change work become more powerful, more effective, and more sustainable.



Ai-Jen
Poo
National Domestic Workers
Alliance

The Change We Need

Long-standing social structures and powerful opposing forces stand in the way of our vision for economic, racial, and social justice and sustainability. But where are we falling short? Are there things about the way we work that contribute to our lack of success?

My own introduction was in 1969, at a campus meeting of SDS (Students for a Democratic Society). We had begun splintering into mutually mistrustful factions—Progressive Labor, New Left, the Revolutionary Youth Movement. Passions were running high, fueled by frustration that the war still dragged on, despite our years of struggle. As the meeting began to degenerate into a shouting match, a short, dark-haired woman grabbed the microphone from the speaker and started screaming invectives. Suddenly, I felt like I was 50 feet above the room, looking down, no longer a part of the scene. As I watched people shoving each other for control of the microphone, the thought appeared in my head, “This is not revolutionary! This is more of the same!”

Decades later, we activists are still too often getting in our own way.

It's like we're a bunch of dogs taken out for a walk on leashes. Three of us are pulling in one direction, two of us in a different direction, and lots of us trying to run off on our own.

VICE PRESIDENT OF A NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL GROUP
DESCRIBING HIS OWN SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM



We're afraid to get into real issues because it feels like there's too much shit built up. The space in meetings doesn't feel safe. You feel dumb asking questions. People shut other people down. It's too aggressive and intimidating... not supportive.

ORGANIZING DIRECTOR OF
A LEADING SOCIAL JUSTICE
ORGANIZATION

Yet, I am continually inspired by the dedication, the brilliance, the passion, and the caring of those who stand for justice and our Earth. The time I spend with my activist sisters and brothers is my personal antidote to the despair I sometimes feel reading the newspaper. There is so much to honor and celebrate in our people, our leaders, and our institutions.

The analysis that follows is offered humbly, in full recognition of the enormity of the challenges we face and the shortage of resources that makes the work all the more daunting. But painful as it may be, we must be willing to look squarely at what's not working in order to find the remedies we need.

As we grapple with the questions of what limits our effectiveness, a number of themes have emerged:

1. **The cost of anger**
2. **Challenges in collaborating**
3. **Emotional balance**
4. **Ambivalence about power**
5. **Activity vs. results**
6. **Over-valuing of head vs. heart**
7. **Unsustainable modes of working**

We can see variations of these dynamics within labor unions; social justice, women's, environment, LGBT, and indigenous groups; in foundations and other intermediaries; and from grassroots groups to our country's largest social change institutions.

As we delve more deeply into our analysis of what's not working, consider two things:

1. **Even with these shortcomings, we have accomplished so much.**
2. **Think how much more powerful we could be if we could overcome these challenges.**

The Transformational approach offers help and possible pathways to address all of these challenges.



The cost of anger

Righteous anger is a natural and appropriate human reaction when confronted with the reality of injustice, oppression, or the tragic degradation of our own habitat. Anger can provide an empowering step up out of victimization and helplessness.

However, while anger helps rouse people to action, it does not necessarily provide the best long-term fuel for sustained social action. Anger can be a powerful force when channeled. The problem is when anger runs us, when it becomes a constant, a primary source of our activism. Over time, the same anger that seems to give us energy takes something from us as well. Chronic anger can sap our hope, our ability to dream and to love, and can turn to bitterness or depression. And our habits of anger are too easily turned on each other.

Cornel West speaks of the need for “hope, creativity and joy” to help us “rise out of oppression” and the possibility of facing “deep inner pain without bitterness or revenge.” I recall hearing this story about Nelson Mandela:

Mandela had invited Botha, the previous President who had jailed him, to share the stage at the Independence Celebration. Years later, Bill Clinton asked him, “Tell me the truth. Weren’t you angry all over again?” Mandela answered, “Yes, I was angry. And I was a little afraid. After all, I’d not been free so long. But,” he said “when I felt that anger well up inside of me I realized that if I hated them after I got outside that gate then they would still have me.” And he smiled and said, “I wanted to be free so I let it go.”

I’ve been angry too long.
My heart aches. I keep
thinking there must be
a better way.

A RACIAL JUSTICE ADVOCATE
IN A ROCKWOOD LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE
TRAINING

Challenges in collaborating

This continues to be our nemesis. We've simply not been able to work together well enough to successfully harness our potential combined power.

When I consult with our activist teams and organizations, I hold that the wisdom and skill to meet their challenges usually lies within the team. Yet, the collective brilliance and power of teams is often limited by poor communication, too much ego, too little trust, and too few relational skills. Rather than synergy, there's often lack of alignment among leaders, staff, departments, Boards, and members. The truth is that many, if not most, organizational problems are caused or exacerbated by a lack of people pulling together and failing to harvest their full potential.

As for relationships between organizations, hearing the word "coalition" can engender feelings of dread in activists. We are fragmented into thousands of groups, and the path to generating enough power to forward our agendas requires working together. Yet our attempts to collaborate across organizations are too often hampered by conflicting assumptions and strategies, inability to align, mistrust, jealousy, power struggles, or competition for recognition and funding.

Finally, at the macro level, our Progressive world is broken into issue areas and identity politics. We're off fighting our own battles, yet our issues are interconnected.

Structural racism permeates most of our issue areas—from immigration, to the environment, to economic justice. Yet people of color and whites all too often struggle separately, even though our futures depend on each other. I remember sitting in a climate change summit listening to white middle class leaders despair at their failure to move national legislation forward. Their concerns seemed far removed from those who struggle to pay next month's rent. Two days later I sat talking with a colleague of color who was working to create

affordable housing in South Florida. I felt increasingly unsettled listening to his multiyear plan, haunted by my memory of slides in the climate change meeting graphically showing the cities he was organizing sinking completely underwater from rising seas.

We all know that so long as we are divided into separate movements, we will not have enough power to win. Yet our attempts to build true cross-movement collaboration have been, at best, short-lived.

We have a dysfunctional team at the top with deep divisions among leaders. We don't make hard choices. There is a lot of internal politicking that's trumping the program we're trying to do. We don't trust each other.

**EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT OF
A NATIONAL LABOR UNION**

We tend to forget who the enemy is. We spend too much of our energy fighting with each other. If we could actually all get on the same team, we might have a chance of winning.

**LEADER OF A NATIONAL
JOBS COALITION**

CHALLENGE #3

Emotional balance

Our people are deeply committed to their work. Many are very bright, experienced, and highly skilled. Yet, we too often sabotage ourselves. Smart strategic thinking and technical skills are no guarantee of emotional maturity and balance.

When asked to facilitate breakdowns between organizations, or negotiate conflicts in coalitions, much of the time we have to deal with what is called “emotional triggering.” This is when events in the present restimulate past pain, fear, or anger out of proportion to what’s actually happening in the present. Our forebrains, the product of millennia of evolution, get hijacked by our limbic systems.

All human beings carry woundings from our past—patterned responses embedded in our brains and nervous systems. Shocking numbers of us have experienced sexual, physical, or emotional abuse. Many of us have been victimized or traumatized by oppression due to race, gender, sexual orientation, or differing abilities. Even those from privileged backgrounds and relatively “healthy” families often carry wounds of loss, anxiety over self-worth, and fear of failure.

Again and again we see how these emotional wounds play out at work. A leader with positional power lashes out abusively at staff. “Discussions” over budgets start to feel like life and death struggles. Differences over strategy become personally threatening to the point where dialogue and a search for common ground become impossible.

*For we have, built
into all of us,
old blueprints of
expectations and
response, old structures
of oppression, and
these must be altered
at the same time
as we alter the
living conditions
which are a result
of those structures.*

AUDRE LOURDE



Ambivalence about power

Many of us came to activism in reaction to abuses of power. We often carry a deep-seeded mistrust of power, and may identify more with feeling powerless than powerful. It is remarkable how many of the activist leaders I have trained and coached feel awkward about exercising their appropriate authority.

After rebelling against authority for many years, it can be hard to make the switch to having power. Many leaders try to hide or deny the realities of power differentials in their organizations, much to everyone's confusion. Other leaders, acting out of awkwardness around their power, end up being unskillful or overbearing. Some leaders have had to wrestle with concerns that people won't like them if they're too powerful. Too many of our leaders hold back from making tough or unpopular decisions, such as confronting poor performance or firing. When Progressive leaders actually do succeed in standing strong and clear in their power, our collective confusion around power often leads us to tear down our own leaders.

Our staffs mirror the ambivalence of our leaders. On the one hand, leaders are continually asked to give us clear direction. Yet the day you become a leader, you also become the screen on which people project their lifetime of negative experiences with authority, abuse of power, patriarchy, white supremacy, etc. Activists who spend their days speaking truth to power and fighting against "The System" have a hard time making the switch to being respectful of authority in their own organizations. I was the former Board Chair of Greenpeace USA where our motto was, "No compromise!" Imagine trying to facilitate a room full of several hundred members trying to reach agreement, all coming from an orientation of "No compromise!"

The result of this collective discomfort around power means that our institutions are often hampered, even incapacitated, by unclear lines of authority, murky decision-making processes, and lack of accountability. In order to win power politically, we must fully claim our own power.



I know I'm the president. But inside, I don't feel like a president. I have a hard time being direct with people, telling them what I want them to do. I wish I could say I was being humble. But the truth is, I feel ambivalent about exercising my power.

**NATIONALLY RECOGNIZED
PROGRESSIVE LEADER**

CHALLENGE #5

Activity vs. results

Our people work unbelievably hard, but relatively few of our activist organizations have cultures of high performance. We see too much activity that fails to yield the hoped-for results.

Our leaders are parachuted into their roles with little, if any, training and mentoring, limited support, and inadequate resources. If an organizer, campaigner, lawyer or policy wonk was especially good at what they do, one day someone said:

“O.K. Now you’re Executive Director.”

“What does an Executive Director do?”

“Don’t worry—you’ll figure it out.”

And our newly baptized leaders heroically throw themselves in, going by instinct and learning by trial and error.

When running a business, we get constant, timely and unmistakable feedback about what’s working or not working. No profit... and we don’t make payroll. In a non-profit, it’s often hard to find clear relationships between the money we receive from funders or members and our performance.

Our leaders too often miss being trained in key organizational competencies such as performance management, strategic planning in times of rapid change, accountability tools and decision rights, change management, and a steady focus on execution. Even if leaders have good training, it can be very challenging, especially for advocacy groups, to find the right measurements to provide the ongoing feedback needed to drive optimal performance.



Our longer goals aren’t clear. We move like sheep, not clear why we’re doing what we’re doing. Not a clear mission focus against which to prioritize. What’s most urgent and most achievable become the priorities, rather than what’s most important. We’re flying by the seat of our pants.

SENIOR MANAGER IN A
NATIONAL PROGRESSIVE
INSTITUTION

Overvaluing of head vs. heart

Progressives are children of the dominant, patriarchal culture that has overvalued thinking and denied the importance of our feeling selves. We have been taught to devalue the inner intuitive wisdom, which is the birthright of every human being. Activists have tried to win peoples' engagement with facts and analyses, often failing to appreciate the human need for meaning and connection. We have not always understood the degree to which people are driven by their emotions and the belief systems through which they relate to facts.

There is growing evidence that the newly-defined notion of Emotional Intelligence actually has more impact on leadership effectiveness and job performance than traditional measures of intelligence. Research has shown that Emotional Intelligence is twice as important in contributing to leadership excellence as intellect and expertise alone.¹

Yet, we often see among activists knee-jerk responses against anything too “touchie feelie,” mimicking patriarchal inhibitions against “touching” and “feeling.” When Rockwood launched our first 4-day transformational workshops, we faced enormous skepticism about the value of spending so much time “navel-gazing.” Overall, we have been conditioned to pay too much attention to head at the expense of heart and body.

I've lost the passion I once had for this work. I have no life. I'm running on fumes. I don't know how much longer I can go on.

A RESPECTED NATIONAL SOCIAL CHANGE LEADER

*The intuitive mind
is a sacred gift
and the rational mind
is a faithful servant.
We have created
a society that
honors the servant
and has forgotten
the gift.*

ALBERT EINSTEIN



CHALLENGE #7

Unsustainable modes of working

Talk of burnout is endemic in activist circles. A recent survey showed that high stress and long working hours were the number one cause for activist leaders to leave their jobs. One of the most uncomfortable moments in the Rockwood trainings is when participants fill out our “Urgency Index” and have to publicly acknowledge the degree of their habituation to stress.

We usually think of stress and overwork as “quality of life” issues—and indeed they are. Stress harms our physical health, our relationships, and our enjoyment of this precious life. Yet it’s also important to understand that stress is actually one of the greatest impediments to our effectiveness. We tell ourselves that we’re working hard because of the pain we see in our communities or the devastation of Mother Earth. But our frenzy of activity impedes more than it forwards our success.

Chronically operating from crisis and stress exacerbates all the other six challenges to successful social change work. Our entire existence narrows to today’s to-do list. When we are frantically racing, we fail to invest the time in planning, reflection, evaluation, and capacity building that could help yield greater and more consistent results.

When stressed, we operate out of scarcity and our ability to collaborate plummets. Our emotional intelligence suffers, we become unbalanced and more easily and frequently prone to irrational and destructive behavior. We become victims, if not contributors, to the dominant culture’s toxic obsession with speed, stimulation, and unsustainable lifestyles.

*We’re so busy
mopping the floor
we forgot to
turn off the spigot*

ANONYMOUS

Progressives are quick to point out and criticize the frightening patterns of over-consumption we are engaged in as a culture, but rarely address the corollary—the blind belief in the value of productivity. We are unable to acknowledge even the possibility that our lack of synchronicity with nature, our inhumane ways of being in the world and our unhappiness are a direct result of our obsession with productivity and action, as much as they are of our addiction to consumption... Reclaiming our humanity is the truly revolutionary act.

JESSE MACEO VEGA-FREY,
DHAMMA TEACHER, ACTIVIST



FEBRUARY ONE

Elissa
McBride

American Federation of State,
County & Municipal Employees

Levy

The Remedy and a Vision

This analysis is not meant to be discouraging. Our existing success in winning so many victories is a testament to the dedication and brilliance of our people. But we can and need to do better. The emerging Social Transformation Movement offers principles, practices, and tools to help unleash the maximum potential power of our people and our organizations.

As social transformation is still nascent, different leaders and practitioners have differing ways of articulating this work. Below is the vision that was the seed of the Rockwood trainings and continues to guide my own work:

To create a substantive shift in the effectiveness, health, and sustainability of those working for a more just and sustainable world—its leaders, its people, and its organizations:

- From fear and anger to hope and positive vision
- From inefficiency and activity to disciplined performance and results
- From burnout to sustainable activism
- From piecemeal efforts to systemic change

It is a vision of social change organizations that are vibrant working and learning communities, caring for their people, respecting differences, effectively maximizing resources and opportunities, united with a vast network of groups in effecting the social, economic, political and spiritual changes necessary for a just society and healthy environment.



TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

I started as a community organizer. I was good at it and got promoted. But the more “successful” I became, the less happy I was. I only knew one speed, overdrive. Community organizing gave me a convenient ideology and 100-hour workweeks in which to lose myself and to hide from the actual demons I was racing to avoid. I had only one approach to resistance—push harder. But results were hard to assess and collateral damage to relationships mounted daily. Then I attended the first Art of Leadership and it was like a veil was pulled back. Nearly a decade later (and lots more training in the transformational approach) I expend less effort, work fewer hours, make better choices, build stronger teams, invest in the long-term more vigilantly, stay centered more consistently, rely on my emotional intelligence more regularly, wield power more gracefully, forge collaboration more genuinely, and take humble pride in the terrific results we are producing. I learned to be more curious, to say, “I don’t know” more often, and to express love as a leadership trait. I am making far more real change with far less effort and a lot more joy all along the way.

SIMON GREER, PRESIDENT,
NATHAN CUMMINGS FOUNDATION



The Four Roots of Transformation

The heart of Transformative Social Change is the intimate connection between the outer work of strategizing, organizing, and campaigning, and the inner work of who we are as human beings. Transformative change asserts that our success in creating a more just and sustainable world requires our ability to connect with the deepest longings of people, that we develop our emotional intelligence as well as our political analysis, that we live and practice justice and sustainability in the way we do social change, and ultimately, that we be spiritual as well as political leaders.

- 1) Rather than being something completely new, the transformational approach stands firmly on the shoulders of some of the great social change leaders of our time, such as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Cesar Chavez, Dorothy Day, and Nelson Mandela. These leaders and the movements they helped found have drawn deeply from the well of spirituality. Their greatness lay not only in their strategic brilliance but also in their ability to touch our hearts and souls. Our activist heritage is rich with the understanding of the need to integrate personal and social change. King's vision of *Beloved Community* and Gandhi's philosophy of *Satyagraha* stressed a moral code of personal and collective ethics as essential to creating a just world. A rallying cry for feminism was "the personal is political." We can learn a great deal about transformative approaches to leadership and social change by studying the work and lives of such leaders and movements. But, the power of the emerging field of Transformative Social Change comes also from cross-fertilization with traditions and disciplines other than social action.
- 2) In the creative ferment of the 60s, many of us engaged in working for Civil Rights, the anti-war movement, and feminism while others turned inward. What was the inner revolution that was needed to

liberate us from the confines of a repressive society?³ Out of this exploration came the Human Potential Movement—a far-reaching social impulse that birthed Humanistic Psychology, re-evaluation counseling, a proliferation of various psychotherapeutic and body-centered healing modalities, trainings like EST/Landmark, and the self-help movements. Many of these spin-offs can be rightly critiqued for lack of rigor, cult-like qualities, being a balm for the privileged, or failure to meaningfully engage with social issues. However, these 50 years of creative experimentation into human behavior and social interaction have produced an invaluable harvest of theory and practice which we can draw from to help address the challenges we face as a social change movement. Just a few of these contributions include principles, tools, and processes for helping people heal from trauma, cultivate personal self-responsibility and empowerment, build community, and develop the critical leadership skills of emotional intelligence.

- 3) As part of this same journey inward, many turned toward spirituality. Some found this connection in the religious traditions in which they were raised. But a shrinking world has also provided increased access to the wisdom and practices of other cultures. While there have been tendencies towards dilettantism and commercialization of Eastern religions, many have taken deeply to heart and put into dedicated practice the profound teachings of traditions such as Buddhism, Taoism, Sufism, Aikido, and Yoga. Others, while trying to stay mindful of the danger of cultural appropriation, have found guidance in studying the traditional wisdom of indigenous cultures. These transformative practices have been gateways to inner peace, clarity, and mind/body wellness for millions of practitioners. Increasingly, activists are finding all these

practices not only to be of immense personal benefit but completely relevant to better leadership, better organizations, and better collective action.

- 4) The fourth major strand in the emerging web of Transformative Social Change is Organizational Development. Born in the mid-50s, this discipline seeks to improve the viability and effectiveness of organizations. Much of its evolution has come via the corporate sector, as they have had the resources to invest heavily in research and development. In more recent years, there has been significant cross-pollination with the Human Potential Movement, helping to foster a sub-speciality of Organizational Transformation. Our Progressive institutions are in need of help, and Organizational Development has much to offer.

Transformative Social Change has been evolved out of these four strands: traditional spiritually-infused activism, humanistic psychology, spiritual practices, and organizational development. Each strand is powerful in its own right, but it is the interweaving of the strands into Transformation that we believe holds particular promise for our Progressive movements.

The heart of Transformative Social Change is the intimate connection between the outer work of strategizing, organizing, and campaigning, and the inner work of who we are as human beings.



Why Change Efforts Fail

It is not only Progressive social change that struggles in trying to effect change. Most change efforts fail.

Gym memberships skyrocket every January as a result of New Year's resolutions. However, 80% of new members drop out within 30-60 days,² and less than 5% stick with their exercise goals.³

Professional help is no magic bullet for individual change efforts. Almost 50% of psychotherapy patients drop out before completing treatment.⁴ For those who persist, success is debatable. For example, research shows that fewer than 50% of married couples that complete counseling end up happily married.⁵

Organizational development is a huge and profitable business. One company alone, McKinsey & Company, has annual revenues of over \$6 billion dollars and 94 consulting offices across 52 countries. Yet McKinsey itself reports research that shows **70% of organizational change efforts fail!**⁶

And while those of us who have been campaigning and organizing for social change for decades can point to some victories, it's painfully clear that many of our progressive initiatives are far from successful.

So, why do most change efforts fail?

Everyone and everything is **interconnected** and **interdependent**—part of a larger system. Most change efforts fail because we focus our efforts on only one or a few variables of a complex system. We may experience what seems like progress, or even a breakthrough, but all too often the larger system, like a rubber band, tends to pull itself back into the homeostasis of the pre-change conditions.

Let's look at the approaches designed to help individuals make change in their lives. Psychotherapy has traditionally worked primarily with peoples' inner lives—their emotions and thoughts. But therapy often fails to help people address the actual environmental conditions of their lives that exacerbate (or even cause) whatever psychological difficulties they may be facing. In today's managed care system that emphasizes saving costs, much therapeutic help now focuses on short-term behavior changes without ever addressing the inner lives of the human beings that drive their behavior. Other professionals and agencies may take on the external factors—helping people find better housing or better jobs—while too often failing to adequately address the thoughts and feelings or the behaviors that may lead people to recreate the same problems in new conditions.

We see a similar pattern in approaches to organizational development, where the field has traditionally focused on changing organizational structures and processes while inadequately dealing with the human beings that make up these systems. Organizations invest huge resources in developing new strategies and changing reporting structures, performance management, or information systems, yet often fail to achieve the desired results due to lack of ownership from the people who work there. Other practitioners focus on trying to change behavior. Ropes courses are a popular approach to team-building, yet team spirit is often defeated by the way the work is structured, compensation systems that favor individual performance, or sheer overload.

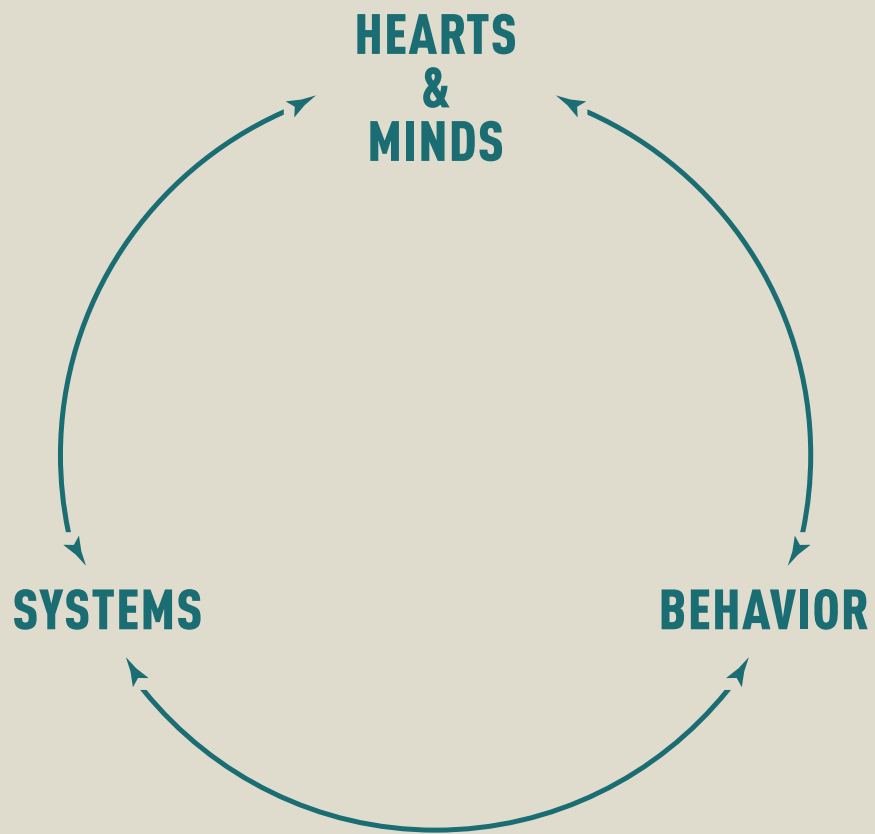
In recent years, there has been increasing realization that organizational systems and processes cannot change without addressing organizational culture and the needs and

emotions of the human beings who work there. Yet, we can also see the shortcomings of a singular focus on people. All too often, groups will go to an off-site retreat, have a “deep” experience together, make all kinds of commitments, and three months later see it all fade because organizational structures didn’t support all the good intentions made on retreat.

For change to be sustained, we must somehow address all the key elements that make up a system.



THE WHEEL OF CHANGE



The Wheel of Change

Above all, transformation is systemic change—a conscious attempt to address all the key factors that make a human being, an organization, or a society what it is. The Wheel of Change is a key transformational model that helps us to identify and address the main elements of any human system.

The Wheel of Change asserts that to create true change, transformation, we must work with three domains of human beings and their systems:

- **Hearts & Minds**
- **Behavior**
- **Systems**

HEARTS & MINDS:

Hearts & Minds refers to all that goes on inside us individually and collectively—the things we feel; our beliefs; our thoughts; the stories we tell ourselves about how things are; the philosophies and ideas that shape our understanding of reality; what we want (our dreams and aspirations); and what we believe to be possible or impossible. If we want to make change, we must change the way we think and feel.

BEHAVIOR:

The second domain is Behavior. Based on what's going on in our hearts and minds, we make choices to act—or not act—in certain ways. For example, when we feel inspired, we will likely act more boldly than when we feel discouraged. If staff in an organization feel trusting of one another, they will deal more skillfully with critical issues than in organizations where there is low trust. If we want to make change, it is not enough to only change the way we think and feel. The inner shifting of Hearts & Minds must be translated into real changes in our habits, the conversations we have or choose not to have, and the norms and agreements by which groups operate.

SYSTEMS:

Lastly, we turn to the domain of Systems. This includes all of the things in our external environment.

American culture has traditionally placed great emphasis on the individual and the individual's capacity to make things happen—the self-made man, the rags-to-riches stories and the notion of pulling yourself up by your bootstraps, the emphasis on individualized self-help, etc. This frame of individualism can blind us to the enormous impact of systems on our lives. The external aspects of our lives often frustrate or overwhelm our best intentions to change.

Organizational systems and structures are strong and entrenched and, when left unaddressed, will defeat the good will and efforts to make change by the people who work there. At a societal level, there are interlocking structures that reflect and reinforce power, and challenge our ability to effect change. Our work to create better housing becomes limited by employment. The struggle to get better jobs for people is undermined by unequal access to quality education. Attempts to better educate our children are impacted by everything from poor nutrition to an eroding tax base to unenlightened educational policies. And efforts to successfully address all of these “structures” run headlong into the continuing and omnipresent existence of racism.

These three domains continually reinforce each other. While this self-reinforcing cycle tends to keep individuals, organizations and societies resistant to change, fortunately the transformational approach can help us to initiate a self-reinforcing Wheel of Change.



What Is Transformation?

Transformation is an approach and a methodology for individual, organizational and social change that is profound, deep, radical, and sustainable. Those of us committed to Social Transformation are committed to using this methodology to achieve social and economic justice, human rights, and a sustainable environment.

The essence of the transformational method is: **An approach to change that marries human technologies for inspiring breakthroughs in the way people think, feel, and behave while simultaneously working in an integrated way to shift the structural conditions in which they live.**

We are working to co-develop a transformational approach to Progressive social change in order to address the shortcomings that are keeping our movement from its highest potential. While there is great diversity among practitioners of this young field, there are also some commonalities to our work. While not necessarily comprehensive, the following principles seem to capture many of the qualities of Transformational Social Change:

1. Attend to the whole system
2. Be the change!
3. It's all about "we"
4. Practice, practice, practice
5. What we appreciate, appreciates
6. Engage the heart
7. Balance yin and yang: focus and flow
8. Connect to the source
9. Go the distance



Attend to the whole system

Transformational change is a truly systemic approach, deriving its power by attending equally to hearts & minds (the inner life of human beings), human behavior, and the social systems and structures in which they exist. It is multi-disciplinary, integrating a range of approaches and methodologies.

Progressives have traditionally focused primarily on the domain of Systems. But even as we have adopted contemporary methods of systems analysis, while paying lip service to the human dimension, the primary focus continues to be on the structures of society. While some call this “systems change,” a truly systemic perspective should be transformational, integrating what is represented by all three domains of the Wheel of Change—whatever people may choose to call them.

Some transformational practitioners focus their work primarily in the domain of Hearts & Minds. This is understandable, given our historical tendency on the Left to under-attend to the human needs of those who do the work and the emotional and spiritual needs of those whom we would organize. However, the emerging work in Hearts & Minds must be nested in a true systemic model. The Wheel of Change offers one such integrated framework.

There are many places one can go to study meditation and plenty of counselors to help with personal issues. There are management consultants and political strategists to help with our work and our organizational capacity building. But the gift of Transformative Social Change is the explicit relating of who we are as human beings to the practical results we create as activists. Transformational change is all about the inter-relationship of the inner and the outer, personal change to social change.



TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

The culture among our senior staff used to be hard-nosed campaigners and organizers, competing with each other, protective of *my* unit, *my* project, worrying about others appearing too successful, trying to hide our own weaknesses. But the collective impact of the trainings we’ve had in transformational practices from Rockwood and our own internal program has created a powerful shift. Our learning around partnership, presence, deep listening, seeing things from the other person’s point of view, self-awareness, and how to interrupt our own unskillful behavior have seeped into our culture. It’s not perfect, but we absolutely become more open, more collaborative. We affirm each others’ work in public. We can admit what we’re struggling with and, for the first time, can actually help each other. We speak more from the heart. This isn’t just about feeling good. A few drops of transformation into our strategic process opens a circle of connection and liberates peoples’ capacity to think and work together. Transformation is about more collective power, more creative solutions to the challenges we face.

DEEPAK BHARGAVA, ED
CENTER FOR COMMUNITY CHANGE



Be the change!

A fundamental tenet of transformation is that who we are impacts the results we will create. Each of us has the capacity to operate across a range of effectiveness. At our best, we can be clear; centered; alert; able to access our inner wisdom and our life experiences; in touch with our power, our resources, and our skills; and willing and able to meet the challenges life brings us. We also have our “off days” when we are harried, out of balance, not present, and not terribly resourceful or effective.

The transformational approach is a courageous refusal to accept that we are victims of our own conditioning and habits of mind. When our energy is off, we usually find something external to blame—problems at work, colleagues, the budget, the report, the Board. It feels like we need to change something external so that we can feel O.K. In transformation, we turn this completely around. Without waiting for things to change out there, we use practices to “be the change.” Various forms of centering using breath, physical postures, visualizations, or prayer and meditation help bring us home to our place of inner power. The transformational approach reminds us that this clarity, this inner wisdom and power, is our birthright, our true nature. It’s not actually about sitting on a meditation cushion or leaving the world to go on a retreat. It’s about a discipline of consistently bringing all our best inner resources to bear to meet the challenge, have the tough conversation, or plan the campaign.

The same holds true for our collective work. Teams and organizations hold a potential for greatness. In transformational work with groups, our job is always to first help the team find its place of power—aligned around a common purpose; operating from trust; with open communication; clear, shared focus; and accountability. From this place, the team’s full capacity can be unleashed to produce exceptional results.

The process of transformational change must always model what it seeks to create. If we are trying to evolve a more transparent and aligned organization, the process of organizational change must be

transparent and inclusive. If we seek to create a just society, we must be willing to redress the persistence of racism, sexism, and homophobia in our organizations and movements. This demands our fierce commitment to personal as well as collective self-examination and healing. All of us have been socialized, habituated, and sometimes traumatized by the systems we are trying to change. If we fail to diligently attend to our own conditioning and our own healing, like many social change movements before us, we will recreate the very injustices we seek to change.

While honoring the lessons of the past and the importance of planning for the future, transformational change also has a uniquely strong focus on what’s happening right now, in the present. We don’t just talk about change; we must be the change. Now!

*We must be the change
we want to see happen
in the world.*

MAHATMA GANDHI



It's all about "we"

The truth is we can do nothing by ourselves. Creating change is all about joining with others. In embracing transformation, we are putting to rest the archetype of the lone warrior.

Our dominant culture teaches us individualism and competition. Transformation invites us to the radical understanding that not only do we need each other but that we are profoundly interconnected.

"If you have come here to help me, then you are wasting your time... But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."

Lila Watson, Australian aboriginal activist

While we support and foster the empowerment of each individual, it's all in service of our collective hopes and dreams. We use our power to lift each other up.

Rockwood's definition of leadership is:

"The ability to inspire and align others to successfully achieve common goals."

Key words here are "others" and "common." It's about "we" rather than "me." The transformational approach teaches principles and practices to loosen the grip of our individual and institutional egos, helping us form the partnerships we need to build power and advance our work.

As is often the case, in times of frustration and despair we often turn on each other. What should be reasonable differences in strategy among colleagues become sources of threat, judgment, and bitter argument. Differences in funding or access breed further distrust; things become personal.

We aren't going to have peace and justice on Earth until we recognize the basic fact of the inter-related structure of the universe.

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.



A great river always begins somewhere. Often it starts as a tiny spring bubbling up from a crack in the soil. But for the stream to grow into a river, it must meet other tributaries and join them as it heads for a lake or the sea.

WANGARI MAATHAI



TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

I had the opportunity to facilitate several “unity” meetings among disparate wings of the Immigrant Rights Movement and between Immigration Advocacy leaders and the White House.

Tensions were running high about whether or not to support the various legislative options, and whether or not the White House was an ally or an enemy. There was also mistrust between larger, better-funded inside-the-beltway organizations and grassroots groups. Fruitful dialogue was being supplanted by accusations of being “too cozy with the White House” and “sucking up all the oxygen,” vs. being “unrealistic dreamers” who “don’t understand the realities of trying to pass legislation.” It was a challenge even to get leaders to agree to meet, as disputes had become very personal.

We began the first of these meetings in a very atypical way. I invited each of the 30 people to tell a story of how they came to this work. Why do you give your life to this struggle for Immigrant Justice? It took well over an hour to go around the circle, as each person shared a tale about their parents, or their sister, or their own struggles to find a safe home. Something shifted in the room as people spoke. “My father came first, alone. Working for years in the fields to try to raise enough money to send for us...”, and, “My best friend is in a detention center...”

I looked around and saw faces begin to soften. The usual guardedness dropping away. Some laughter. A few tears. A growing remembrance that we’re all on the same side, that we’re all here doing this work because we care about justice.

When at last it came time to discuss strategy, it proved to have been time well spent. That sense of connection, of tribe, stayed with us. The rest of the meeting was unlike previous

meetings—not only friendlier, but most importantly, more productive.

We see in this story how the transformative approach facilitates collaboration. A shift in Hearts & Minds created different kinds of behavior—conversations that were collaborative rather than combative. This, in turn, led to changes in the wheel of Systems: new strategies and new structures for going forward more collaboratively. Given the huge struggles in forging immigrant justice, there continues to be ongoing challenges in these relationships. But this kind of approach had its impact. In the words of two national immigration leaders:

“It felt necessary, cathartic and ambitious. We were rushing down a track of mutual destruction, and we now have a sense of having opened a new path of possibility.”

“We are seeing each other as collaborators as opposed to opponents, even when we have different perspectives. Things are in a much better place than they have been for a LONG time.”

It also important to appreciate that collaboration is not just about making nice with each other. It’s about learning how to embrace the rich diversity of different interests and perspectives that can help us achieve the critical breakthroughs we need at this time of increasing complexity.

In transformation, we seek to radically shift the way we are with each other, to help liberate and convene our collective wisdom and power.

ROBERT GASS

Practice, practice, practice

In transformational work, there is a danger of confusing breakthrough experiences with lasting change. In the intimacy of a coaching session or the rarified atmosphere of a retreat, we can create ideally beneficial conditions for human development and watch people expand into their most beautiful selves, like flowers opening to the sun. This can be a meaningful part of the transformational process, as it inspires us to what's possible. However, the post-experience can sometimes be depressing as we watch our enlightened state start to fade into the trace of everyday life.

It's critical that we understand the necessity of practice to integrate real changes into our lives.

I've learned from my mistakes. I'm sure I could repeat them exactly.

PETER COOK

There is a biological basis for habit. When thoughts, perceptions and emotions are repeated over time, the same neural pathways in our brains keep firing. Think of water from a rainstorm flowing down a hill. It begins to form rivulets, which start to create grooves in the earth. The next time water flows, it travels down the same pathways. It is the same with our neurons. They develop circuits and clusters that become increasingly habituated to firing together, and the more they do, the more deeply entrenched our reactions and our habits become.

Staci Haines, an important contributor in the development of Transformative Social Action, likes to say that, "We are always practicing something." She and her colleague Ng'ethe Maina of Social Justice Leadership speak of "default practices: the deeply

rooted behaviors that we do automatically, consistently, and unconsciously in response to any given situation."⁷ And so, left unchecked, we dig the same grooves of our thoughts and our behaviors deeper and deeper.

Fortunately, we can develop new, more beneficial habits. Leading brain research speaks of "brain plasticity"—the capacity of the brain to develop new neural pathways through repetition. But this takes practice, and lots of it. Different sources suggest that it takes hundreds or even thousands of repetitions to develop sufficient neural pathways to achieve what is called "unconscious competence"—when the new pattern is well-enough established that you no longer have to think about it (i.e. a new habit).

Most practitioners of Transformative Social Action offer different forms of practice to support the transformational journey, including body-centered practices such as *Forward Stance* developed by Norma Wong and *Generative Somatics* which is foundational to the work of Haines and Maina. Our habits of behavior and our emotions are inextricably linked to our bodies—to the way we breathe, the way we move and our felt sense of perceiving and interacting with the world. Body-centered practices fully integrate our bodies and are fundamental to learning and change.⁸



The only difference between a master musician and a beginner is that the master practices a lot more.

YASHA HEIFETZ, WORLD-FAMOUS VIOLINIST

Many activists are practicing different forms of mindfulness meditation, thanks to the work of organizations like Vallecitos, Stone Circles and Spirit Rock, and teachers like Angel Kyodo Williams. In our Rockwood yearlong trainings, leaders receive daily practices via email on topics such as authenticity, emotional stability, deep listening and purposeful action.

In organizational transformation, it becomes essential for teams to practice new behaviors together. An example of this from the Rockwood curriculum includes the disciplined use of the POP model.⁹ Before each and every activity, groups learn to make sure they are clear on the POP:

- (p)** What is the **Purpose** of this activity?
- (o)** What are the specific **Outcomes** we hope to achieve?
- (p)** What **Process** will we use to achieve these outcomes?

As the use of such a tool becomes a new team habit, we get reports like:

“It took a while to remember to do it regularly, but I can now say that POP has been nothing less than revolutionary. We’re more focused. We get more results with less effort.”

We all need to practice.



What we appreciate, appreciates

Most activists were raised on critique. We mastered the art of seeing what's wrong in situations, the injustice in how things are, the fault in another's analysis and what needs to be improved. Critical analysis is indeed important. But it also has limitations. Critique needs to be balanced with appreciation of what's good.

"To be truly radical is to make hope possible, rather than despair convincing."

Raymond Williams, author,
influential in the '60s New Left

As activists, we need to learn to build as well as to oppose, to raise up as well as tear down, to honor as well as criticize.

Lynne Twist, co-founder of the Pachamama Alliance and author of *The Soul of Money*, popularized the phrase, "What we appreciate, appreciates." In other words, focusing positive energy creates more positive energy. While critique is important, it can also have the impact of deflating or discouraging rather than inviting change. For example, there is considerable research showing that in order to elicit the best performance from staff, a manager wants to maintain a *minimum* ratio of 4 offerings of positive feedback to 1 piece of corrective feedback.¹⁰ A survey of 20,000 employees in 29 countries showed:

- ▶ Reviews and informal feedback emphasizing performance strengths was linked to a 36% increase in performance.
- ▶ Reviews and informal feedback emphasizing performance weaknesses was linked to a 27% decrease in performance.¹¹

There is an entire field of organizational change called Appreciative Inquiry (AI). Also called asset-based or strength-based change, this popular methodology mobilizes energy and commitment for change by creating conversations with people throughout organizations about what's working,

what is the organization like at its best, what's great about what they do, and how to take the best from their past as they look toward the future.

It's not that we want to ignore critique as an important diagnostic tool, but we activists in no apparent danger of doing this.

While great movements are often born out of anger at what is, they are sustained by hopes and dreams of what could be. Transformation helps us learn to kindle and nourish the power of positive vision.



We don't need a movement that critiques America—we need one that inspires it... We need to move from opposition to proposition.

VAN JONES, CO-FOUNDER,
ELLA BAKER CENTER, GREEN FOR
ALL & REBUILD THE DREAM

Engage the heart

Our patriarchal society has placed great emphasis on the head. Reason is valued over feeling. We are trained to be tough-minded and avoid being soft-hearted. But in over-relying on the thinking function, we fail to appreciate and engage the powers of the heart: our emotional intelligence, our intuition, and the power of love.

65% of heart cells are actually neural cells, identical to brain cells. There is considerable research to suggest that the heart, like the brain, is a major center of intelligence.¹²

The growing field of Emotional Intelligence is turning our traditional assumptions about what makes for good leadership and performance upside down. Only 20% of conventional measures of intelligence account for a person's success in life.¹³ It turns out that such seemingly "soft" attributes as knowing yourself, self-management, the ability to navigate emotions, and empathy for others have dramatic impact on our ability to create results.

Studies show the impact of training in Emotional Intelligence on such "hard" outcomes as:

- ▶ productivity increases of 17%
- ▶ reduction of plant accidents by 50%
- ▶ reduction of formal workplace grievances by 300%¹⁴

Promotion to the top leadership of organizations has been shown to be more a result of empathy, self-control, and teamwork than analytical or conceptual thinking.¹⁵

Emotional intelligence is also key to the success of work teams. A recent study in *Science* magazine showed the intelligence of groups and their ability to solve problems was related far more to emotional intelligence of team members than their intellectual capacity. (Group intelligence also correlated positively with the % of women in the groups.)¹⁶

In transformational work, we place significant emphasis on nurturing emotional intelligence. This encompasses both strengthening our ability to

understand and skillfully interact with the emotions of others as well as increasing self-knowledge of our own emotional nature and wiring, leading to higher levels of self-mastery.

We also validate the power of intuition as a balance to reason, a human ability and gift that tends to be denigrated in the dominant culture. In fact, top research scientists, who one might think would be apostles of reason, have long attested to the power of intuition.

*Instinct will tell the
thinking mind where
to look next. It is always
with excitement that
I wake up in the
morning wondering
what my intuition will
toss up to me, like gifts
from the sea. I work
with it and rely on it.
It's my partner.*

**JONAS SALK,
DISCOVERER OF THE POLIO VACCINE**

Successful business leaders have always relied heavily on their intuition, though they do not always reveal to colleagues the source of their decisions.¹⁷ Courses in intuition have begun to appear in corporations. As part of the transformational shift, activists are now also beginning to reclaim the importance of intuition.



Bruce
Niles
Sierra Club

The transformational approach seeks to rebalance head with heart, reason with feeling. We also unabashedly reclaim the power of Love as a force for change.

“I have lived in places where you were not allowed to acknowledge what you knew. There was always more research, people to talk to and books to read. The external validation is what made your information valid, not your experience, not your reflection, not your passion and definitely not your heart! ... Sometimes you just know and your knowing cannot be lifted up by anything outside of yourself. Sometimes, your knowing cannot be denied—even by yourself. My salvation is found in three words: I do know... When I feel like a revolutionary, I trust my gut.”

Kisha ‘Free Woman’ Montgomery,
healer, sacred activist, Grassroots
Healers International¹⁸

By love, we don’t mean something sentimental or passive. It’s the power of choosing to care and invest with a whole heart. It’s a surrender into the reality of our interconnection. It’s a love that transcends liking or not liking. And it’s a profound commitment to engage fully with people—all people, our friends and our enemies. With the power of love, we can tackle difficult issues of performance with our teammates. Out of love, we can initiate challenging conversations about race, class or power in our own movements. Love gives us the courage to reach across that which divides us. We have discussed the limitations of anger and fear as the basis for our work. Love is the strongest foundation for partnership and collaboration, for building strong teams and coalitions, for organizing an irresistible force for change. Love is the true basis of justice.

*Love is the most
abiding power of
the world.*

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

In the transformational approach, we think of love less as an emotion and more as a commitment and discipline. We cultivate it through meditations on self-compassion and loving kindness and practices of gratitude. It pays off!

*Justice is what love
looks like in public.*

CORNEL WEST

... [He] has always been a great strategist, but he wasn’t a very good leader or manager. But he’s different since he completed his Rockwood yearlong. More human. More present. It’s like he realized that he needs to lead us... not just run off fighting the world on his own. There’s more joy in the organization. I hesitate to use the word, but it’s like there’s more love.

SENIOR MANAGER OF A
PROGRESSIVE INTERMEDIARY,
SPEAKING OF THEIR
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Balance Yin and Yang; focus and flow

In Taoist philosophy there are two energies that work in dynamic interaction with each other: Yang—the active principle, and Yin—the receptive principle. Both are necessary to successfully engage with the complexity of life. True wisdom and harmony lies in finding the right balance of Yin and Yang.

Contemporary, male-dominated Western culture is extremely out of balance. Our orientation toward life tends to be one of control—a bias toward action over reflection, the ongoing attempt to dominate nature, power over rather than power with, a continual and ultimately futile trying to make life fit our picture of how it should be, a relentless striving for more—more material goods, more success, more love, more security.

There is nothing wrong with the robust power and focus of Yang energy. It only becomes a problem when there is a lack of the balancing Yin qualities—an orientation to receive as well as give out energy, the ability to relax and be at peace with what is, the ability to flow with change, the creative potential that lies in not knowing, a willingness to trust in the unfolding of life, the capacity to let go of enough control to engender true partnership.

It is also possible to have too much Yin—to be too passive, to fail to claim what we do know, and to accept what we should not. But think about the word “activist.” Overall, like the dominant culture, we are biased toward action and control. Transformational change is an ongoing dance of finding and living the right balance.

We have a propensity to prematurely rush into action, too often failing to take time for the kind of deep reflection necessary to clarify our goals, challenge our assumptions, and make sure we are all clear and aligned. We can spend far too much energy paddling hard up stream, failing to take

*There is no substitute
for hard work,
23 or 24 hours a day.
And there is no
substitute for patience
and acceptance.*

CESAR CHAVEZ

advantage of the currents going our way. By moving too fast, we often fail to make good use of our deeper wisdom.

With our social change work so oriented toward changing what is, it is understandable that the qualities of acceptance and patience may be less developed. With our work so dedicated to opposing what is unjust, we have less practice in yielding and being at peace with what is.

Learning to let go is a needed transformational practice, especially in this era of increasing complexity and rapid change. We need to learn flexibility, as no plan can truly anticipate what will happen and what might be needed. Many organizational theorists are actually suggesting that traditional strategic planning may be obsolete.¹⁹

*Do you have the
patience to wait
till your mud settles
and the water is clear?
Can you remain unmoving
until the right action
shows itself?*

LAO TSU

An over-balance of Yang shows up not only in a predilection toward action, but a fixation on knowing, on being right. At this time of our rapidly changing and chaotic world, when our traditional methods have been unsuccessful, what we need for our success lies mostly in the unknown. But our attitudes and orientation make it challenging for us to rest in not knowing.

“There is no reason for any individual to want to have a computer in his home.”

Ken Olsen, founder of Digital Equipment Corporation in 1977 (This famously mistaken judgment seriously compromised the future of his company)

“We don’t like their sound, and guitar music is on the way out.”

Decca Records Company in rejecting the Beatles in 1962

We’ve all had similar experiences of being sure of something, only to be proven completely wrong.

To be at ease in not knowing and to learn to wait and be patient when the correct course of action is not clear requires cultivating the Yin principle. This is uncomfortable for many activists. It may necessitate facing the anxiety that underlies some of the push to be certain and to exert control. It asks that we liberate ourselves from our internalized culture of domination and learn to let go of what we cannot control; to surrender our certainty in favor of a willingness to learn; and to cultivate trust or faith in ourselves, in each other, and in the unfolding of life. For some, this is about a deeper relationship with that which is larger than ourselves, whether we call it Spirit, God, nature or the arc of history.

*To be uncertain is
to be uncomfortable,
but to be certain is
to be ridiculous.*

CHINESE PROVERB



Meetings that start in this way (with occasional reminders), have a different tone... and more creative outputs, than typical meetings filled with fixed points of view and little listening.

Transformational change is about embracing the marriage of Yin and Yang. We bring all our knowledge and experience to bear, but we do this with humility in the face of the mystery that is life. We learn to ease up in our attempts to dominate life and engage more in a dance of dynamic interaction with life around us. We learn to temper control with letting go of what we cannot control. While we cultivate the discipline of good planning, we also understand that the only constant is change.

*The difference
between what the
most and the least
learned people know
is inexpressibly trivial
in relation to that
which is unknown.*

ALBERT EINSTEIN



TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

One of the greatest challenges in activist gatherings is dealing with endless debates between leaders who are certain of their positions and listen only to prepare their rebuttal. For example, the climate change movement is waging a losing race against time in order to avert global catastrophe and clearly needs to be doing something radically different. Yet meetings are too often dominated by people repeatedly arguing the same points of view that they held coming into the meeting.

I have facilitated a number of climate change summits. In establishing ground rules for these retreats, I asked, “Is there anyone here who is absolutely certain that they hold the entire answer of what humanity needs to do to avert the threat of climate change?”

Nervous silence. A few giggles. Then I asked, “Is it safe to say then, that what we are most needing at this meeting lies in what we don’t know, in the unknown?”

Nods and murmurs of agreement. “I would then like to propose a very unusual ground rule: a rule of not knowing. You are a roomful of experts on climate change. But if we walk out of here today, and each of you leaves only knowing what you now know—we will have failed. Are you willing to personally agree for today to adopt an attitude of not knowing? Are you willing to speak with humility, knowing that you don’t have all the answers? Are you willing to listen to others as if maybe, just maybe, they might have something to add to our collective understanding of how best to meet this crisis? If you agree, please stand.”

And the whole group stood.

ROBERT GASS



Connect to the source

“When you are inspired by some great purpose, some extraordinary project, all your thoughts break their bonds: Your mind transcends limitations, your consciousness expands in every direction, and you find yourself in a new, great, and wonderful world. Dormant forces, faculties and talents become alive and you discover yourself to be a greater person by far than you ever dreamed yourself to be.”

Patanjali, ancient Indian Yogic Philosopher

The work of social change brings us face to face with human suffering and social trauma, injustice, violence, the degradation of our planet, and threats to our future as a species. We are often struggling with too few resources against seemingly insurmountable odds. From where do we draw the strength to meet these challenges day after day, decade after decade?

The transformational approach invites us to cultivate a connection to a source of meaning and energy beyond our personal needs, ambitions, and fears. The transformative process asks us profound questions such as:

- ▶ Who are we?
- ▶ Why are we here?
- ▶ What gives our life meaning?
- ▶ At the end of our days, what would have been a life worth living?
- ▶ From where do we draw strength?

We ask these questions of individual leaders, of organizations to answer collectively, and even of movements. Social transformation invites us to find a foundation upon which we can stand and meet the great challenges of our time. Transformative practices help us to renew and nurture our connection to a purpose larger than our daily concerns and struggles, to tap into a deep wellspring of strength from which we can draw again and again.

There are countless ways we humans experience this connection to a source greater than ourselves. For many, it is in connection to however we may name and conceive of Spirit, the Creator, the Divine or God. Others find connection through the natural world, the experience of being a part of the web of life. Some draw meaning from a felt experience of identifying with their lineage, a connection to their tribe or ancestors. And for others, it is the love of family and community that is the bedrock of their work and lives.

Social change work is not the easiest career path, nor the best paid. But all of us drawn to social change have such a connection somewhere within us. The practices of social transformation help us to rediscover, renew, strengthen, and more regularly draw upon our source of power and meaning to guide and empower all that we do.

*S/he who has
a why to live
can bear
almost any how.*

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE



Go the distance

At the very beginning of this paper, we described transformation as profound, fundamental change that is sustainable. Something that is transformed can never go back to exactly what it was before. We, therefore, approach this work from the outset with an eye toward what is required to sustain the transformation. The principles and practices of individual and organizational sustainability must be integrated into all our transformational work. Sustainability cannot be an afterthought but must be baked in from the beginning.

Stress, overwork, and operating in a state of constant crisis are the most common complaints we hear from activists seeking coaching and training. As we earlier discussed, it is not only a “quality of life” issue, but also an issue of effectiveness. It can be a vicious circle. A chief cause of why we operate in chronic crisis is the failure to invest adequate time in reflective, high-quality strategic thinking, planning, evaluation, building and maintaining key relationships, and capacity building. Then, once we’re in crisis, we have no time to invest in long-term priorities.

“Workaholics are addicted to activity and all the things that go with activity: speed, peaks and valleys performance, crisis, and obsessiveness around projects. Workaholics operate on less restful sleep than others and consequently are tired and more prone to mistakes. We have confused activity with productivity.”

Diane Fassel, leading expert on workaholism

Sustainability is a meta principle, affecting our other eight transformational principles. As stress goes up:

- ▶ We are no longer able to “Be the change”; we become part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

- ▶ Our ability to collaborate plummets. Everything and everyone else starts to feel like an interruption from completing our to-do list.
- ▶ We have no time or capacity to practice anything (except possibly our bad habits).
- ▶ We become transmitters of stress rather than leaders with positive energy.
- ▶ Our hearts close, and our heads take over.
- ▶ As our survival mechanisms take over, Yin is forgotten as life becomes all about a struggle for control.

If you’re running a sprint, you can pretty much go all out. If you’re running a marathon, you must carefully manage your energy so that you can sustain your pace through the last of the 26 miles. The social challenges we face are not problems with quick fixes. Our children’s children will still be dealing with issues of injustice and environment. We’re trying to run a marathon as if it were a sprint.

Sustainability is so fundamental to transformational change that most approaches teach methods for managing stress. For the Rockwood trainings, I developed a comprehensive approach to sustainability called *Personal Ecology*: “Maintaining the balance, pacing and efficiency to sustain our energy over a lifetime of service.”

In addressing this challenge, as always, we use a systemic approach.

Here are examples of some possible things to do in each of the three Wheel of Change sub-wheels to improve personal ecology:

HEARTS & MINDS:

- ▶ Create a vision for sustainability
- ▶ Clarify your commitment(s) to better personal ecology
- ▶ Identify and deal with ambivalence and semi-conscious motivations and beliefs
- ▶ Train in techniques for dealing with the mental/emotional component of stress

BEHAVIOR:

- ▶ Mind/Body Wellness—institute specific changes in diet, sleep, exercise, etc.²⁰
- ▶ Learn and utilize behavioral techniques to interrupt “stress-cycling”²¹

SYSTEMS:

- ▶ Use the *Load Management Formula*²² to help reduce actual amount of responsibilities
- ▶ Establish clear boundaries on work hours (e.g. no work after 7:00 p.m., or no email on Sundays)
- ▶ Improve time management and information/input management systems

By taking up the cause of Personal (and Organizational) Ecology, activist leaders are finding renewed and renewable energy for the lifetime of work ahead to create a more just and sustainable world.

“When I first came to this work, I was adrift, angry and reeling from severe activist burn-out. I was in real pain, lurching from issue to issue, refusing to give up my activism. But whatever good I was doing in the world, I was doing more damage to myself and harm to others around me. Rockwood’s and Robert’s year-long trainings gave me the grounding and the self-knowledge to birth and lead effective, impactful programs, with less effort, strain and stress than I would have ever thought possible.”

Van Jones, co-Founder, Ella Baker Center, Green For All & Rebuild The Dream

*To allow oneself to be
carried away by a multitude
of conflicting concerns,
To surrender to
too many demands,
To commit oneself to
too many projects,
To want to help everyone
in everything,
Is to succumb to violence...
It destroys the fruitfulness
of our own work.
Because it kills the root
of inner wisdom,
Which makes work fruitful.*

THOMAS MERTON





TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

Great campaigns are like great love affairs because they create the containers for deep transformation. You were too busy to go to dinner or the movies, but suddenly space opens up. You feel things you never dreamed you could feel. Your skin becomes thin and you are open in a way where things that you thought impossible suddenly become possible. The successful campaign for a Domestic Workers Bill of Rights in New York was like a love affair. It showed the power of a transformational approach to campaigning. People were able to see and feel in new ways the possibility of change. We created a container for transformation where everybody—domestic workers, the labor movement, even employers—were able to see their hopes and dreams reflected in the campaign. It was not about painting enemies, it was about assuming the best in people. It was not about opposition. It was about creating something right and good for everyone. We framed and campaigned in a way that helped create an expanded sense of self-interest. Employers were invited to become spokespeople for being supported in going to work and knowing that their kids were being well taken care of. The President of the AFL-CIO, whose mother was a domestic worker, stood in front of the New York Legislature and asked them to pass the bill in honor of her legacy. People tapped into the place of heart and values and came to the campaign bringing positive energy rather than anger. It was like we were all in love.

AI-JEN POO, ED
NATIONAL DOMESTIC WORKERS ALLIANCE



Conclusion

You may notice a relative lack of political content in this article.

Transformational practices and principles can be applied to improve the quality and effectiveness of leaders, organizations, and movements—whatever their social or political ideology. Working with transformative practices is no guarantee of a Progressive outlook. The same practices and philosophy of Zen Buddhism that are embraced today by many Progressive activists were a key element in Japanese militarism, aggression, and racist ideology from the Meiji Restoration through World War II.²³

Our purpose is to develop a transformative approach to Progressive social change. Much of this article has focused on transforming leadership and our organizations. But the end purpose of Transformational Social Change is to help create a more just, democratic, inclusive, and sustainable society. As we work with transformative practices and principles to empower our leadership, our organizations, and our movements, we are experimenting with applying these same principles and practices to our political strategies and tactics. Numbers of organizations have taken up the task of applying the transformational approach to the way we do organizing, campaigning, and advocacy. Among them are Social Justice Leadership, Center for Community Change, Center for Transformative Change, Forest Ethics, Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice, Movement Strategy Center, and many others.²⁴

Some practitioners and intermediaries have focused on serving particular sectors such as community organizing. My own work and that of Rockwood has been to serve all Progressive activist leaders, whatever sector they serve or strategies they adopt. This represents a deliberate strategy of broad movement building. We bring together leaders serving every sector

and constituency, engaged in strategies ranging from revolutionary to policy reform, from direct action to electoral. Our programs build trust and strategic alignment among grassroots leaders, executives of our largest national Progressive institutions, and key funders.

We believe that in order to advance a national Progressive agenda, all of us who value justice and sustainability must understand we're in the same boat, sometimes working together and sometimes working separately, but in the end, pulling together.

Numbers of leaders, teachers, consultants and other intermediaries have helped to birth this transformational approach to social change leadership, organizational effectiveness, and movement building. It is best understood as an emergent field phenomenon. We began experimenting with an initially somewhat skeptical audience, but as this work has taken hold and demonstrated its value, a thousand flowers are blooming.

We have, however, been missing a comprehensive ideology of transformational change, a way of contextualizing the many principles and practices that various practitioners have been adopting and offering. Given the richness and diversity of this movement, it is not appropriate for any one person to attempt authorship of its intellectual basis. So I have asked other key thought leaders in our movement to offer their own thoughts on *What is Transformation?* You will see their offerings on the pages that follow.

It is my hope and prayer that the ideas presented here will be useful in understanding and communicating about this dynamic, emerging field of Transformative Social Action.

May these thousand flowers continue to blossom!



Annie
Leonard

The Story of Sugar Project

How interested are you
relationships with...
your cohort who...
different...
0% 1%

How interested are you in...
relationships with...
your cohort who...
different...
0% 1%





WHAT IS TRANSFORMATION?

OTHER VOICES

There are growing numbers of people who are helping to birth emerging forms of Transformative Social Change. Included here are brief answers to the question “What is Transformation?” from just a few of these thought leaders. I chose to include these particular voices because it has been my privilege and joy to work closely with each of them. I honor the importance of their contributions to the field.



TARA BROWN,
Director, Hidden Leaf Foundation
Co-Chair, Seasons Fund for Social Transformation

At its most basic, transformational change entails the very simple yet radical act of waking up to what is actually so, and engaging with the world from this nuanced place of knowing! This waking up often involves quieting our minds so that we can actually listen and hear others, and it often involves turning our gaze inward in order to understand the subtle workings of our own interior. It invites us to be genuinely present in each moment and to align our actions with what is actually true right now.

Transformative social change work is about nurturing this capacity for presence and alignment within the leadership of Progressive social change movements. Manifesting inner wisdom in the outer world is an essential pathway for advancing a more just, ecologically healthy, and compassionate society. For social change agents, this approach often enables us to lead with love rather than anger, to act in cooperation with allies rather than alone, and to approach adversaries with a commitment to their well-being.

...



STACI HAINES,
Executive Director, Generative Somatics

Transformation is systemic change—deeply personal and in our social structures. In transformation, that which we were has literally passed away, and a new structure has emerged. Transformation doesn't just give us new insights—rather we change systemically, learning to embody and act from the new schema. Neuroscience has let us know that working with conscious thought alone is not sufficient to create change in behavior or the ways we relate. Somatics works with our muscular, organ, and nervous systems (our capacity to act, think, and feel) to actually embody change. This is transformation. We feel different; we be different; we think, react and act differently.

We are social animals, powerfully moved by our social environment and human relationships. Individual and social change are inseparable because we are always living in and being shaped by our social context. We have embodied existing social conditions—our beliefs, ways of being in relationship, our habits. Our mind/bodies can't innovate a new system from its existing patterns. We don't know how to work our way to liberation unless we also change ourselves. But we don't want to only focus on changing ourselves. We must collectively work to change conditions so that generations from now our institutions will teach us to embody equity, deep democratic process, deep interdependence with our environment. Individual transformation on its own does not create social change. But social change without dealing with our individual selves leads to solutions from our "old shape" and not the liberating change that we need.

...



CLAUDIA HORWITZ,
Director, Stone Circles

Transformation is fundamentally an undoing of patterns and conditioning that keeps us small in the world. As these patterns come undone, there's a return to what I believe is the birthright of human beings: greater access to our inherent happiness, our deep well of wisdom, a sense of well-being, greater creativity and power. Like the carving of a statue, that which is not needed is chipped away until something of beauty that was always within the stone is revealed. There's a mystery to transformation, an element of grace. It happens in a realm that we don't have language for.

Transformation is important to social change because it increases our ability to make things happen and to create results. When a group of people working for change collectively engage in this chipping away, we address the patterns that limit the work: patterns of overwork, oppression within our work, short-term thinking, us vs. them mentality, and how ends don't always justify the means. We begin to think about how we do the work, not only the outcomes. The process of transformation brings a new level of dignity and effectiveness to the work of making a better world.

...



TAJ JAMES,
Executive Director, Movement Strategy Center

Transformation is about bringing something new into existence, not just rearranging what exists. It's about fundamentally altering relationships within and between people. We need transformation in our society; the values currently at the core of our culture produce isolation and fragmentation and result in unnecessary inequity and suffering. Social change has sought to address structural relationships that are deeply flawed, that can't be fixed by reforms that simply rearrange the existing relationships and structures.

However, this alone is not enough. In order to fundamentally effect social change, we can't ignore the impact that growing up in these systems and culture has had on us as individuals. Many of us have begun to draw upon traditions of individual transformation to help us understand that we are not simply isolated individuals, we are part of something larger, more mysterious. As we explore our beliefs about the world and our purpose here, we are also learning to see the nature of human reality in new and more powerful ways. These two streams of transformation are ultimately part of the same path. We cannot change social systems without transforming people and the way we are with each other, but neither can we wait for individuals to become their better selves without transforming the social systems that shape us.

...



PHOTO: ANGEL KYODO WILLIAMS

NG'ETHE MAINA,
Founder and Director, Social Justice Leadership

The transformation of society and the transformation of individuals are inseparable. As social justice organizations, we've historically been focused on transforming society. We're seeing that this can't happen without transforming people. But neither is transforming people sufficient by itself to create a society free from oppression and to reach our vision of justice, democracy, and equality.

None of us know what transformation will really look like, because we're trying to become something we haven't yet experienced. But we can get glimpses of it. All of us create narratives that help make meaning of the things we experience. But these narratives can become limiting, as we get habituated to particular stories that aren't necessarily real. For example, we may be carrying a narrative that everything is difficult, or everybody's out to get me. Through transformational practices, we come into the present and see the illusory nature of our stories. We have an experience of being in synch with life as it is. In this moment, we get glimpses of transformation, of what's possible.

We're trying to bring different elements and facets of society into harmony: how society is structured, the economy, the politics, the personal and individual pieces of how people lead their lives, the meaning they make. I don't think this is easy. Things will certainly change. But not necessarily for the better. It will take rigorous, dedicated work with no guarantees. But ultimately, it's transformation or stagnation.

...



ALTA STARR,
Leadership Coach, Trainer, Facilitator
Program Officer, Ford Foundation

There is a growing commitment to achieving a more just society through transformative social change rather than relying on only changing policies and politics, approaches whose results fall far short of addressing society's complex problems. It's an exciting development. Those working for change are reintegrating wisdom from earlier social justice movements as well as looking to learn from the fields of organizational and human development. This integration of work to address the external—the laws and institutions that create inequity and social suffering—with work to nurture personal development (for example, the ability to recognize and manage one's own reactivity and its consequences), is the hallmark of transformative social change. As this approach gains greater traction among social justice activists and leaders, we are seeing it begin to influence campaign goals as well as the forms collaborations and alliances take.

Equally impressive, those working for social change are increasingly demonstrating the skills to create the authentic, empowering, non-dominating relationships that are the heart of the democratic process and key to revitalizing and sustaining the powerful movements we need.

...



ANGEL KYODO WILLIAMS,
Founder, Center for Transformative Change

Transformation first and foremost is an approach. It's all about presence, compassion, collaboration. It's an approach that heads toward outcomes, and releases outcomes at the same time. It's about having an intention, but then continuing to get out of the way of what needs to happen, so that we can see what's emerging rather than mistaking our own desire for what's actually emerging. Most important is that you don't know what transformation is going to look like. But it's like Love. We know it when we see it.

Transformation requires a transformative practice. A practice can be just about anything. It doesn't have to be sitting on a cushion. It can be the way we walk, the way we observe the world. Anything can become practice when we bring our intention to the act (or even non-action). Unless we do social change in a way that embodies the principles we want to see in the world, there will be no social change. It begins with inner work. Your inner work is not taking away from the Movement, because the Movement is you.

...



AKAYA WINDWOOD,
CEO & President, Rockwood Leadership Institute

Most change is incremental. It builds on what came before. It's akin to adapting a recipe—the cook uses the same basic ingredients, but may change the spices. We end up with the same dish overall. It's like going from vanilla to chocolate.

Transformation is going from vanilla to music. It's discontinuous, alchemical. It isn't a linear, predictable set of events that moves from idea to manifestation in the way most planning has historically happened. Both change and transformation are necessary, but today there is a great need for transformation. I believe that social transformation is the aggregate of all our best hopes and dreams in the context of an evolving ecosystem. We are groping towards something we can't even articulate, because we've never been here before. We don't know what it is yet, but there is a collective longing for this kind of change. Transformation is a prayer.

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SUMMARY OF

The People's Movement Assembly Resolution

ADOPTED AT THE US SOCIAL FORUM, JULY 30, 2010

A social change movement rooted in transformation is critical to making new worlds possible.

We believe the ends of justice can never be served by the means of injustice and that we must exemplify the conditions we wish to ultimately find ourselves in. Rather than being compelled by anger and separation, we believe in an abiding commitment to embody the revolutionary change we seek. And, we believe movement work is at a vital transition point, one marked by larger and larger numbers of people who are interested in and hungry for transformation.

Thus, we resolve that transformative social change is the path by which our movements can create the conditions for a mutually beneficial, intersected vision of justice and liberation. We commit to placing the methods and philosophy of transformational practice at the core of our movements, and to supporting ourselves, allies, and opponents to take up transformational work that is rooted in an explicit analysis of systemic oppression and structural conditions.

We realize the work of transformation unfolds over time; much of our old identities and practices pass away and radically altered new ones emerge. Some practices that connect, heal, rebuild and have continuity with the old are newly honored. Transformative practice includes a broad spectrum of modalities that are capable of undoing conditioning, thereby effecting systemic change both internally and externally; it results in increased awareness, vision, compassion, skillfulness, and presence. We recognize this work is grounded in ancient wisdom and that it is entering a new phase of coherence that empowers us to move forward.

We commit to a Transformative Social Change: a philosophical, practical, and strategic process to effect changes within ourselves, organizations, institutions, communities, systems, and society that are rooted in positively-oriented (vision-based), sustainable (personally and environmentally sound), equitable (interdependent), life-affirming (generative) purpose and vision.



NOTES

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- ¹² <http://www.heartmath.org/>
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- ¹⁴ Pesuric, A., and W. Byham. "The new look in behavior modeling." Training and Development, July 1996, 25-33. For a thorough listing of research of Emotional Intelligence on leadership and work performance: http://www.eiconsortium.org/reports/business_case_for_ei.html
- ¹⁵ http://www.ihhp.com/what_is_eq.htm For 515 senior executives analyzed by the search firm Egon Zehnder International, those who were primarily strong in emotional intelligence were more likely to succeed than those who were strongest in either relevant previous experience or IQ. In other words, emotional intelligence was a better predictor of success than either relevant previous experience or high IQ. The study included executives in Latin America, Germany, and Japan, and the results were almost identical in all three cultures.
- ¹⁶ Woolley, A.W., C.F. Chabris, A. Pentland, N. Hashmi, and T.M. Malone. "Evidence for a collective intelligence factor in the performance of human groups." Science, 330, 2010, 686-688.
- ¹⁷ Agor, Weston H. "How Top Executives Use Their Intuition to Make Important Decisions." Business Horizons. 27. Jan/Feb (1986): 49-54.
- ¹⁸ Blog by Kisha 'Free Woman' Montgomery <http://www.kishamontgomery.com>
- ¹⁹ Brown, Shona, and Katherine Eisenhardt. *Competing on the Edge: Strategy as Structured Chaos*. Cambridge: Harvard Business School Press, 1998.
- ²⁰ Executives who worked out regularly over a 9-month period showed a 70% improvement in their ability to make complex decisions as compared with non-exercisers. Over 50 studies conclusively show that mental performance—reaction time, concentration, memory, and analytic reasoning—all decline in proportion to lack of sufficient sleep.
- ²¹ "Stress-cycling" The tendency for stress to accumulate over the course of a day. We begin to get stress. Our tolerance for stress goes down. We get more stressed...
- ²²
$$\text{Load} = \frac{\text{goals} \times \text{efficiency}}{\text{resources} \times \text{time frames}}$$
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- ²⁴ For a more comprehensive list of organizations engaged in transformational work, see: Zimmerman, K., Pathikonda, N., Salgado, B., James, T. (2010). *Out of the Spiritual Closet: Organizers Transforming the Practice of Social Justice*. Oakland, CA: Movement Strategy Center: http://www.movementstrategy.org/media/docs/6450_Out-of-the-Spiritual-Closet.pdf



ROBERT GASS, ED.D

is known for pioneering work in leadership development and organizational change for over 30 years. Holding a doctorate in Organizational Psychology from Harvard, his work synthesizes a diverse background in social change, humanistic psychology, organizational behavior, the arts and spiritual studies. The former President of ARC International, a global consulting company specializing in transformational change with corporations such as Chase Bank, General Motors and The Gap, Robert served for many years as executive coach to well-known business, non-profit, spiritual and political leaders. For the last 10 years Robert has worked exclusively with Progressive social change leaders and organizations including the NAACP, Sierra Club, MS Foundation, Green for All, Service Employees International Union (SEIU), Reform Immigration for America (RIFA), the Democracy Alliance, Rainforest Action Network, Center for Community Change (CCC), Gore's Alliance for Climate Protection, MoveOn.org, leaders in the Obama administration, and the U.S. Senate Chiefs of Staff. His vision is to help create a transformative shift in the power, effectiveness, health and sustainability of the Progressive social change movement. He is the founder of the Social Transformation Project and co-founder of the Rockwood Leadership Institute.

Robert and his wife and life partner of 40+ years, Judith Ansara, have for many years led retreats for committed couples throughout North America. He is also a recording artist and performing musician. Robert is passionately committed to supporting those working for social and racial justice, human rights, sustainability and preservation of our natural environment.

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Whose writing is this? When I read back through these pages, I hear the echoes of words spoken throughout my life by family, friends, colleagues, students and teachers. I easily recognize how I have been impacted by so many thinkers, activists, leaders and authors who have come before me.

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Social Transformation Project
info@stproject.org