



CENTER FOR WHOLE COMMUNITIES

New Models for Transformational Leadership

Talk given by Peter Forbes

For Transformational Leadership Workshop at Knoll Farm, August, 2010

I recognize how my own life has expanded and contracted in direct proportion to my courage, so I want to acknowledge this moment and the courage all of you have shown in this chance to come together for workshop on leadership.

What an important time to be together. Last night we heard many different motivations for wanting/needing to come together to consider leadership: how to best embrace the leadership you have, how to manage commitment to family and commitment to work vision, how to accept being an accidental leader, how to gracefully led go when you've led for decades.

The great Buddhist teacher and activist Thich Nhat Hanh believes that every person, without exception, has at their core being the deepest intention of love and goodness. He believes this love and goodness is the primary source of human power and leadership. He teaches three virtues of leadership: 1) letting go, 2) love and 3) insight.

These are really challenging virtues to maintain in a world dominated by theories of change, mission statements, action plans, deliverable outcomes, not even to mention the real and imminent threats of climate change, bio catastrophe, hunger, civil unrest, and poverty.

The purpose of this workshop is to discover how to better align our greatest wisdom, our courage, our compassion, our story to be in service to ourselves and to create positive change in the world, in the face of imminent threats that call out in us reactions of anger, fear and denial.

The two primary ideas or models that we'll be working with are:

- 1) A comparison between transactional and transformational leadership.
- 2) An ecological model of leadership (which Tom Wessels will introduce later this morning).

But first, here's a *Harpers* Index of sorts about our country to help us consider leadership.

2050 internationally recognized date by which our planet must reduce carbon emissions in order to avoid irreversible, catastrophic changes in all our natural systems.

2042 white Americans will be a minority in the United States. And this is true now in four states: Hawaii, Texas, California and New Mexico. 40% of all Americans under the age of 24, right now, are people of color.

23.5 million (the number of Americans who lack access to a supermarket within one mile of their home. There are 4 times as many supermarkets in predominantly white neighborhoods compared to black neighborhoods)

30% (the percentage higher number of liquor stores in low-income zipcodes than higher income zipcodes.)

200% more prisoners than farmers in America

565 acres per hour is the pace of land development

1 in 4 Americans suffer enough from clinical depression to land them in a hospital

These factoids make visible critical and inter-related forces that require a new leadership model for all who care about the fate our land and the fate of the people. To see the fate of the land and the fate of the people as the same is an expression of that new leadership.

I agree with the social critique bell hooks who asks *“How do we create a culture of belonging that feels empathy for the earth and for one another?”* Strikes me that this is a core question for every effort seeking to create positive change in America.

We’re all flying on instruments, trying to carefully observe the terrain even though there’s no clear map. I feel pretty sure, however, about one fundamental concept:

The essential skills today are relational, not just transactional.

There are two distinct models of leadership that both flow from different interpretations of the work of Charles Darwin. One might be called Transactional Leadership and the other Transformational Leadership. We are suggesting that the future requires leaders able to understand and embrace the tension and reality presented in both models. Neither is whole without the other, and there are moments when both are appropriate. We believe we have entered a moment when the transactional leaders must give way to the transformational leader.

The first model, Transactional Leadership, has often embraced that part of Darwin that is best reflected in his concept of “survival of the fittest.” This might be called the business school model of leadership and it suggests that the organizations with the best messaging campaign, the best relationship with funders, the best staff, and the best delivery of its mission will out-compete all the others to win. This concept of leadership is best articulated in a contemporary way by the dean of Harvard Business School, Jay Light, who wrote, “Leadership is the ability to direct focused energy

and resources over a sufficient time to a highly defined problem.” Tom is going to show us how this form of leadership is often expressed when one looks at a forest from the “above the soil” perspective.

The second model of leadership is most often called Transformational Leadership and it has organized itself around that part of Darwin’s teachings and discoveries that led him to write, “survival of the most adaptable.” This model of leadership is articulated by Mark Roberts, the Dean of the Harvard School of Public Health who wrote, “Leadership is looking up and taking responsibility for what is actually happening in the world.”

There is a new breed of leaders who run their organizations more like an ecosystem than a business. Their organizations have their own specialized niche, but they also collaborate, adapt and act interdependently. They know their own success is dependent on those with whom they once competed.

These successful organizations are able to quickly form new alliances, share resources, pick up new tools, and adapt to changing conditions. The core skills of this new leader are more relational than transactional; the new skills include movement-building, story, holding the tension between process and product, and developing personal and professional analyses of the role that race, power and privilege have played in America.

When leaders and their organizations work in this manner, new life flows to them. They become less brittle, more flexible and better collaborators. I’ll offer some concrete examples in a few minutes.

This workshop is about the forms of leadership that enable us to engage across sectors and differences to build relationship and connection that more fully utilizes the assets that are present, to then re-imagine and create a new story about our future.

This week we'll explore what stands in the way of our individual and collective ability to lead our own lives and our movements for change in new ways: time oppression, isolation and fragmentation between environmentalists and human rights advocates, the difficulty of finding insight in a world where we are connected without real connection.

Add onto this the separation created in America by our history of race, class and privilege. These are forces of isolation and fragmentation make creating healthy whole food systems really hard. Of course, if it were easy we would have done it already.

Let me speak for just a moment to the conservationists who are part of this retreat this week.

Because of my respect for what you do, I'm going to be as forthright as I can be. You are very successful people. You work exceedingly hard and you do exemplary work, but it alone is *not sufficient*. Even though you are brilliant and strong, you are not strong enough to do the work of conservation in isolation of other movements and other human need.

First, the challenges to the land and to biodiversity are too complex and far outpace what can be accomplished by laws or buying land.

Second, your past successes will be challenged more and more until you can effectively make the case that your mission of healthy land and biodiversity is relevant to someone like this man: Brahm Ahmadi of Oakland who founded Peoples Grocery to bring healthy food to urban neighborhoods where liquor stores stand in place of grocery stores. Or this woman: LaDonna Redmond of Chicago, who is blending public health, land conservation and food security on the west side. Or Paula Garcia of New Mexico, who is conserving culture through conservation of traditional waterways.

They care deeply about land and biodiversity too, but, to be honest, they do not see themselves as conservationists. They don't see themselves in the story of conservation.

How is it that those of us who care about protecting marginalized people and those who care about protecting the land have ended up today isolated and divided from one another?

Why does it matter that conservation in our country includes far fewer people of color than whites?

My biggest change in thinking is on this idea. The health of the land is inseparable from the health of the people.

Now, let me know talk more directly now to those of you here who lives are dedicated to the health of people and community.

Here's an example of the same problem, but seen through the lens of public health (go to video).

An article in the *New York Times* explains the issue in more detail: "Seven and a half months into Ta-Shai Pendleton's first her child was stillborn. Then in early 2008, she bore a daughter prematurely.

Soon after, Ms. Pendleton moved from a community in Racine that was thick with poverty to a better neighborhood in Madison. Here, for the first time, she had a full-term pregnancy.

As she cradled her 2-month-old daughter recently, she described the fear and isolation she had experienced during her first two pregnancies, and the more embracing help she found 100 miles away with her third. In Madison, county nurses made frequent home visits, and she got more help from her new church.

The lives and pregnancies of black mothers like Ms. Pendleton, 21, are now the subject of intense study as researchers confront one of the country's most intractable health problems: the large racial gap in infant deaths, primarily due to a higher incidence among blacks of very premature births.

The best explanation for the high infant mortality rate is *isolation*. Take this in: *Isolation and lack of community is the strongest determinant of Para-natal death.*

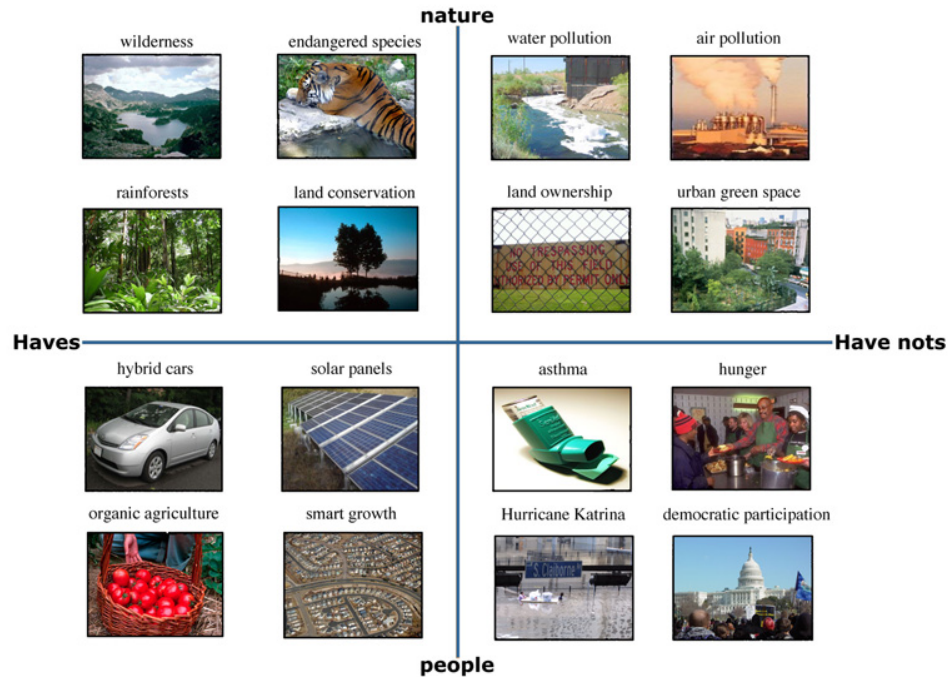
And, for many people of color, inequitable access to healthy food is also a major contributor to health disparities. For example, adult obesity rates are 51% higher for African Americans than whites and 21% higher for Latinos.

The other great challenge of people that deeply affects the land and our communities is our nation's increasing fear of the other. Call it racism or whatever you want. But I can tell you this: those fastest growing areas in America are also the most segregated. Areas with a more than 6% growth rate are all overwhelmingly Balkanized racially. The writer Rich Benjamin calls this phenomenon "whitopia." Benjamin says, "what happens is a nation incapable of compromise when people lose touch with those who think and act differently from themselves." This is corrosive to our democracy, to our land, to our food systems and our communities.

Sadly, these divisions between people are mirrored in our movements for change.

Let me show you more specifically the damage this has created.

We call this the Whole Communities Framework.



It's not a map of the way we would like the world to be but a map of the way we think the world is today.

- First, there is the divide between those who care about people and those who care about nature.
- This divide is worsened by the fracture between those who have privilege and those who do not.
- If you have financial resources and care about nature, you may be interested in these types of issues.
- If you're privileged and focused on people, these very well may be your concerns.
- If you have little privilege and care most about people, perhaps you are interested in public health, structural racism, democratic participation, and hunger.

(●) Lastly, if you have little privilege and care most about nature, you may be interested in clean air, access to parks and urban greening.

Our point is this: all of these concerns are critically important to creating a healthy future, and none will succeed without the other.

Those who care about climate change aren't going to make enduring progress without those who care about Katrina. And those who really care about social justice need less expensive energy and a healthy climate. The game-changing work around climate change is bringing together the most connected with the most affected.

That's hard. My generation was never trained or equipped to move across this map and create new alliances. Honestly, a lot of my friends got into environmentalism because, frankly, they preferred nature to people.

Some are already referring to this call to engage with people and community "mission creep", but I would call it creeping into our mission. Creeping into the future. It's the form of leadership that transforms conservation to continue to be relevant.

This map should piss you off. One point of this workshop is to learn the leadership skills to transform our change efforts and do away with these lines.

The goal of whole communities work is relationship: to reweave and strengthen our communities, and strengthen our movements for change, by giving leaders the tools and the courage to reach out beyond their quadrant of the map to create new alliances and a stronger narrative.

Every successful social movement for change has shared three common characteristics: 1) compelling call to moral vision and action, 2) easily understood symbolism and story, and 3)

inclusiveness. These are critical to creating a healthy future, and we'll take up all three of these in this workshop.

This week is about learning from one another what it will take to collaborate and what parts of our vision are shared and to begin to taste what emerges that is compelling.

Visioning and dreaming is hard to do for lots of reasons.

The biggest is this: most of us have been trained in a form of leadership that critiques more than it creates. And yet what is most compelling in acts of social change are the dreams of a different way of living. Dr. Martin Luther King said, "No social movement can succeed without painting a picture of the future that people want to go toward."

The significance of vision to creating change is enormous, but many contemporary efforts at change have reduced dreams to action plans, strategies and tactics. May I remind us that Martin Luther King did not say, "I have a *plan*". He said I have a *dream*, and he spoke of his deepest values without offering strategy and tactics about how we might get to his dream. He knew that if he could reach people with a shared story for how they might better live.

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So, there's a very strong relationship between leadership, vision and story. Story helps us to see through the eyes of others and to cross the borders that separate us from one another.

What these three things -compelling moral vision, story and inclusiveness- add up to is something we call Transformational Leadership. This is distinct from Transactional Leadership, which is what I was raised on.

Here are a few examples of what our alumni have accomplished with their own expressions of Transformational Leadership:

Transformational leadership is a regional land trust in California collaborating with migrant farm workers to create housing. It's a rural land trust in Colorado providing below-market-priced timber from its protected lands for affordable housing. It's a national conservation organization building a charter school to help keep rural, low-income Hispanic ranchers on their land. Transformational leadership is Oregon environmentalists buying health insurance for loggers to help them reduce their economic dependence on cutting trees. It's Indians, ranchers and environmentalists reaching an accord on their mutual interdependence and use of water in the Klamath basin.

This is what can happen when we do this work together:

We can build power. Anyone with a clear and caring mind is inherently powerful. Power is built from the soil up by our capacity for courage and compassion and, collectively, by our ability to take our next best steps toward one another. Here at CWC, we help individuals and organizations to conspire together. Literally to breathe together. This is about making allies, being a good ally.

We can help one another to grow. Personal transformation isn't enough today. Our goal is for all of us to understand how and why our success – your success – is bound up entirely in someone else's success.

We can innovate. I credit much of my understanding of the role that difference plays in innovation, organizational strength and democracy to the great forest ecologist, Tom Wessels. A diverse forest is a healthy forest. Well, a diverse society is also a healthy society. Democracies flourish through their diversity of beliefs and opinions. Organizations, like human bodies, become stronger, more adaptable, and more resilient as they become more diverse. Our ability to embrace the full diversity of our community and our country is the source of our innovation around creating a healthy future.

[This talk was followed by Tom Wessels' presentation]