



CENTER FOR WHOLE COMMUNITIES

What We're About

*A transcript of a presentation posted online at our website at
www.wholecommunities.org/about*

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

Why is it getting harder and harder in our communities to talk with one another?

How did we arrive at an environmental movement with 10,000 organizations, each with a vision for their part of the problem, but few compelling stories about how to live today?

Why is it that we have all the science and the facts, but don't have the hearts, minds and actions of our neighbors?

Center for Whole Communities was started by a diverse group of leaders grappling with these questions who came together to explore more honest and complete responses, to practice a different form of leadership, and to seek systemic change.

Ours is a work in progress. Our strong desire is to offer ourselves not as authorities of any kind, but rather as partners, collaborators, and resources in the effort to achieve communities dedicated to fairness, inclusiveness, and ecological and cultural resilience.

Our founders were a conservationist, a farmer, a publisher, a community development expert, an environmental justice advocate, a college professor; individuals with multiple perspectives who sensed their own isolation and desired to find a whole that was greater than the sum of the parts. Their challenge was the same as yours today: how do we break out of our comfort zones and start a conversation with someone different than us about the important choices facing our communities and our nation?

They saw a world, and an environmental movement, paralyzed by divides:

There's the red state/blue state divide that has polarized our democracy.

There's the urban/rural divide that has pitted city people against rural people. In 1974, 22% of Americans were city people and now 80% are.

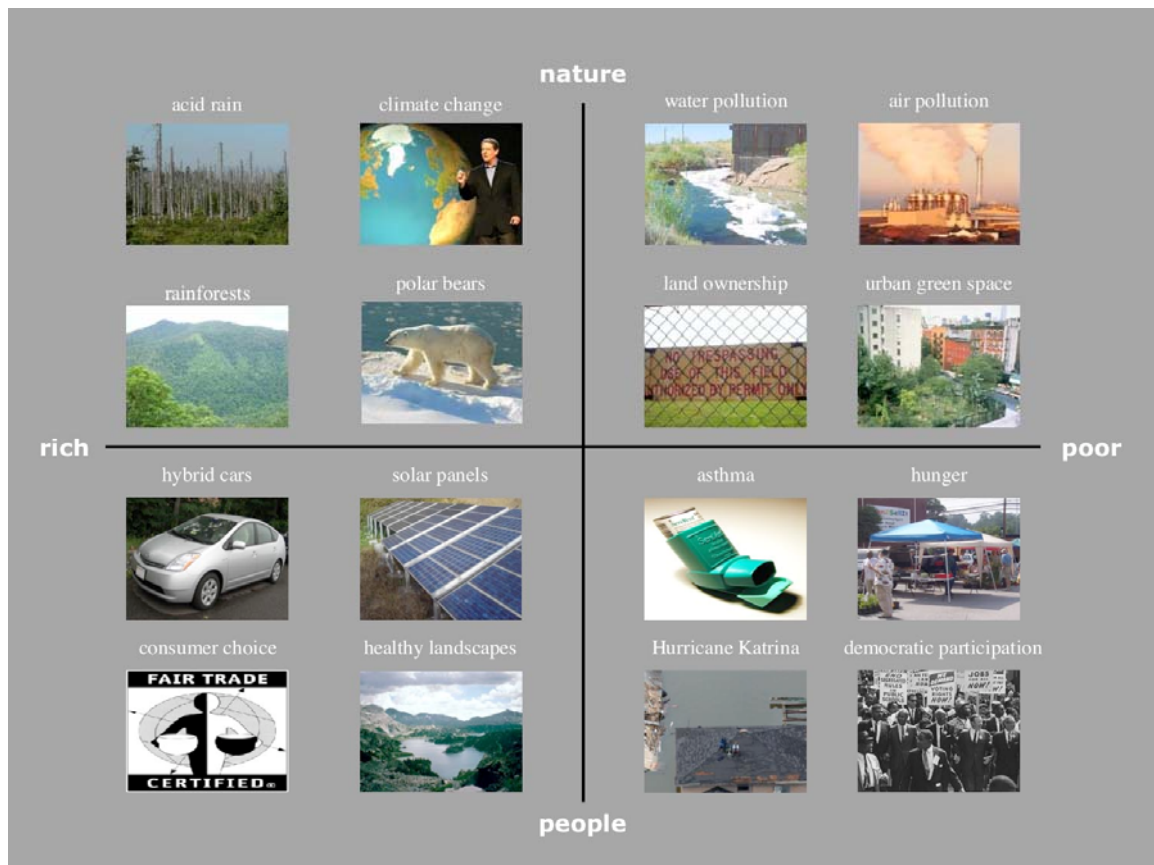
There's the divide between rich and poor. The top 1% of the U.S. population now controls 1/3 of the nation's wealth.

There's the black and white divide: people of color in the United States are three times as likely to live in poverty as whites. And yet by 2050, 50% of Americans will be non-white.

And here's the most difficult part: our progressive movements for change are *as divided and fragmented* as our culture. All of these divides hurt people and hurt the earth.

The divides that weaken the environmental movement the most are about ideology and privilege.

Here's a simple and imperfect graph to show you what we mean:



Down the middle is a line representing the divide between those who care about people and those who care about nature.

This divide is worsened by the fracture represented by the line across the middle – that between those who have privilege and those who do not.

If you have financial resources and care about nature, you may be interested in the types of issues represented in the top left quadrant – biodiversity loss, wilderness preservation and so on.

If you're privileged and focused on people, the types of issues in the bottom left quadrant very well may be your concerns: renewable energy, sustainable consumer products and so on.

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.

The point we want to make with this undoubtedly generalized graph is that all of these concerns are important, and none will succeed without the other. Those who care about endangered species will not make enduring progress without those who care about Katrina.

The complexity of today's problems makes it unlikely for any effort to succeed in isolation. To focus on a single issue, like wilderness preservation, is today both a privilege as well as a source of isolation. And focusing on a single issue can lead an organization to be overly competitive, more prone to exaggeration, and less adaptive and resilient.

We aspire to reweave the movement from the center:



The work of Center for Whole Communities is to reveal those relationships that have always existed between people, between different issues and causes, and between action and effect.

We try to bridge divides and eliminate the structures that keep these divides in place. We create a safe harbor where very different leaders and groups come together, see problems in the context of larger systems, find shared grammar, language and story, vision more boldly, and move forward in unconventional alliances.

Our theory of change is simple: Once a leader tastes wholeness in their own thinking and in their own actions, they won't go back to that narrow view of success that isolated them in the first place. They will begin the work of reweaving their own lives, changing the landscape of the environmental movement, re-discovering the way they would like their community to be, and finding the new avenues and allies to get there.

We focus our work at three points of leverage: We inspire change first at the individual leader level through Whole Thinking retreats, at the organizational and coalition level through Whole Thinking workshops and finally at the movement level through our alumni support and widespread use of Whole Measures, our guide for redefining and measuring success in a broad, cross-cutting manner—transforming the way conservation and social justice are practiced.

At the core of our work, today, are these four practices:

- 1) *Dialogue and inquiry among diverse voices,*
- 2) *Acting for and from the whole,* what we call whole thinking
- 3) *Harnessing the power of story,* which is to ensure that our dreams are not drowned by our facts.
- 4) *Understanding the role that racism, power, and privilege have played in keeping us from accomplishing our dreams.*

By revealing the relationships between things, we help ourselves and others to look up from the deep grooves of personal and professional lives to see the big picture and to discover fresh perspectives. Something powerful occurs when I tell you who I am, and you tell me who you are. To hear one another's story is the *only* place upon which a shared narrative can be built. Our goal is to co-create with our alumni around the country a new story about people, land and community.

By working through unifying “door-way issues”, themes like the health of our children and the health of our food supplies, we are able to speak to many more Americans and we are able to connect meaningfully with leaders as diverse as ranchers in the west and urban gardeners in the east.

The number of leaders in our programs has grown geometrically and geographically.

The ripples of *their* collective work are now becoming clear. Whole communities work is the commitment to inclusivity, to work on behalf of every human being, not just your supporters and members. It's about deep diversity: the long term commitment to having our staff, our boards and our programs reflect the changing face of the nation.

It's equal commitment to cultural and biological diversity, because one is not durable without the other. And it's our capacity to genuinely ask reciprocal questions of one another: why do I need you to be successful? Why do you need me to be successful? It's offering a dream without being dreamy; one that paints a picture of a vision realized that people are drawn toward because they can see themselves in it. It is transformational leadership that includes listening, cultural competency, adaptation and flexibility, making room for others, and a prophetic voice.

And why do we do this? Because connecting people to one another and to the land is the fundamental building block of healthier communities, landscapes and nations.

We invite you to join this work and to make it your work.

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