

# **A Responsibility to Enjoy Yourself, A Responsibility to Flourish.**

Practices of Personal and Organizational Sustainability  
in the pursuit of Social Change.



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Once upon a time I was doing youth work at an Inner-City Elementary School in Vancouver, BC. I was young, vivacious, and idealistic. I threw myself into the work without hesitation, seeing intensely the injustices that our kids were facing, and knowing profoundly that they deserved more. This purpose drove me, and they were rich and transformative years in my life. All of us involved in justice work know what that is like. Other factors existed too, though, and I imagine that we all know them as well. As I threw myself into this work, I slowly began to equate it with my own worth. Thinking that I was a valuable human being because of the work I was doing, it became my identity. I also began to think of myself in my role as absolutely irreplaceable, and was reluctant to share the workload with anyone else. Yet slowly the bureaucracy of the educational system, the staffing dynamics of our school, and the pressure I was putting on myself, wore away at the passion and creativity in my work. I felt burned out and tired, I was no longer as effective, and I was disappointed in myself for it.

Not only does this sort of ‘burn out’ impact individuals, decreasing physical health, straining interpersonal relationships, and demoralizing self-worth, it has a significant impact on our organizations and on the work we are doing. High turnover and vacancy rates in jobs, extended sick leaves, agitated workplace culture, and decreased productivity over time, strain organizations and their members, and make it ever more difficult to achieve the visions we strive for. (Evans et al)

Burnout is most widely understood as “a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment” (Maslach 3). While it is often popularly

considered a result of simply working too hard or too much, it is also a result of the way that we work, and the way that we understand our work.

It is from this understanding that I began studying intersections of justice work and religion (or spirituality), certain that I needed to figure out how to sustain myself over the long term, and adamant that I wasn't the only one. The following notes are the result of my studies, and lessons from the work I've been involved in prior to and during this degree.

It is my opinion that you already know everything I have to say. There is a teaching that each of us is born with all the knowledge that we will need to know to live, but that we must uncover it, and learn to stop forgetting it. In my years of justice and social service work thus far, there are many things I wish I had remembered, many ways I could have been more effective, many opportunities for more wholeness and more enjoyment. I am writing to remind myself, and to remind you, because in the long journey toward a more just world, these are important things to keep in mind.

I've divided these practices of sustainability into 'personal' and 'organizational', and have laid them out in an order that seemed logical to me. While each section blurs into the next, there are headings so that you can browse through and read whatever most catches your eye.

## PERSONAL

### **Doing the work, letting go of the result**

As good a place as any to begin is to let go of where you're going. This might be the most difficult lesson of all. Buddhist nun and teacher Pema Chödrön practices it with the mantra 'Abandon any hope of fruition', explaining, "The key instruction is to stay in the present. Don't get caught up in hopes of what you'll achieve and how good your situation will be some day in the future. What you do right now is what matters."

The other reason I begin with this lesson is because I struggle so much with it. I know the importance of the present, and the process. I've spent some of the past year working at a low-barrier homeless shelter, and intellectually knew the importance of spending time with people, building relationships and community. However I had a hard time simply valuing this time spent together, without attaching it to hopes that people would get clean, get counseling, set goals, and begin to overcome their barriers. I have sticky-notes of Chödrön's mantra all over my house, and still I have a hard time letting go of the results. I'm actively practicing it every day.

Why is this so hard? Because as much as we might agree in theory, when it comes right down to it, we know that it matters what the results of our efforts are. It matters because we care about the people we're working with, and the issues we're tackling, and measuring the results is how we determine whether our methods are effective and our effort is worthwhile.

We all have big visions of better worlds: an end to homelessness, more just food systems, transgender rights, the restoration of wetlands, well-funded public education, etc. So there is a way in which the results matter, absolutely. What I am boldly suggesting is that the process needs to matter more. In order to sustain yourself and others through the long haul, you need to ensure that there is integrity and purpose in your actions each day. You have so little control over the future, you may not achieve the farthest goal. Make your efforts fulfilling and worthwhile anyways, and know that letting go of the results will mean letting go of some efficiency, because the things that are really worthwhile take time.

When you stop focusing exclusively on the results, space is created. Space to build relationships and coalitions, space to reflect and to think outside the box, space to notice what's going on around you. Theologian Henri Nouwen comments that, "impatient action not only leads to overworked and overcommitted people but also tends to sentimentalize compassion." (122) Focus on the worth of what you're doing right now.

Let's try this. Think of the results you hope to see from your work. What if it were never going to happen? What are the worthwhile things that you are doing anyways? Between where you stand now and your long-term goal, what are all the opportunities for empowering people, learning, initiating conversations, strengthening relationships, and getting others involved in the work? Make note of these, and try to find ways to prioritize them. They matter.

*“It’s more a matter of believing the good than of seeing it as the fruit of our efforts.” Taoist Philosopher Chuang Tzu*

## **A compassionate, non-heroic mentality**

My own experience has been that there are many unhealthy mentalities within social service and activist settings. Two of these are particularly prevalent, and diminish the effectiveness and enjoyment of the work. The first of these is the savior mentality, and the other is defensive cynicism.

I use the term ‘savior’ mentality to describe the passionate belief that the work you are doing is absolutely necessary in order for people to be saved or fixed, which you know is what they need. Perhaps more common in previous eras, and within religiously-based groups, this ‘savior’ mentality is problematic for a lot of reasons.

To begin with, it is really all about the ego of the person doing the ‘saving’ and the importance they derive for themselves from being needed and from being so morally generous. Secondly, it is unsustainable. It incorrectly reinforces the belief that the more of your own needs you forfeit for the benefit of others, the ‘better’ a person you are. Visible signs of how ‘good a person you are’ then become things like being stressed and over worked, not sleeping enough, and not having time for family/friends/fun. This mentality often comes with some sort of a belief in a later reward, whether that is in the afterlife, or simply later in life through money, better jobs, or praise and admiration. Thirdly, this sort of mentality patronizes and dehumanizes the people you are working with, while also not meeting their actual needs and desires. Beyond being unhealthy, this kind of savior mentality is blatantly harmful to the person holding it as well as everyone around. These days, as

our mainstream social service philosophies (or theologies) shift, this savior mentality has become much less overt. However it is still present, embedded in a cultural paradigm that equates stress and busyness with importance. Look out for this mentality in yourself, untangle and un-learn it each time it shows up. “The great lie is that there is a helper and the helped.” (Smith 66) People don’t need to be saved by other people. We need to be in community with one another.

The second mindset I encounter frequently, and struggle with greatly, is an incredible amount of cynicism and detachment. In some ways I think this mentality is the opposite end of the pendulum-swing from a savior mentality. It is disillusionment with the work and any sort of tangible outcomes from it. Cynicism seems obvious when we consider the vast amounts of suffering in our world, the complex economic and political systems that sustain it, the dysfunction in our own institutions and organizations, the disappointment of not seeing things improve, and the heartbreak of seeing people we care about in pain. “Confronted with human pain and at the same time reminded of our powerlessness, we feel offended to the very core of our being and fall back on our defenses of numbness and anger.” (Nouwen 52) The problem is that it is paralyzing, and it doesn’t get us anywhere. All of these things are true, and require a number of responses, including grief and action, but cynicism stops us from being creative and compassionate, and the detachment it causes stops us from building the kind of healthy and joyful relationships we need to overcome it all. Again, notice cynicism in yourself, pay attention to when it arises, and what you are trying to protect yourself from.

## **Knowing the privilege you bring**

In any kind of work for justice, an anti-oppressive framework is necessary. We exist within larger economic and political systems that unjustly favor some over others based on a number of irrelevant factors: class, race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, appearance, nationality, religious affiliation, etc. These systems have been created such that those benefiting from them are able to go through life nearly unaware of the privilege they receive, and the harm others experience. No matter your life circumstances, be aware of these larger political, cultural, and economic systems, and their impact on your life and the lives of others. At the core, all of our work should be about dismantling these injustices, and creating new systems.

I've been learning this one as I've lived it, and still have a lot to figure out. I come from an upper-middle class, white, well-educated, sort-of-Christian, hetero-normative family. I am cis-gendered, mostly-straight, and what a friend of mine calls 'temporarily able-bodied'. There are an enormous number of privileges and advantages that I enjoy because of all of this, that everyone should receive, but not everyone does. It's easy to forget to notice these privileges, and when I forget to notice, it becomes easier to assume that the barriers people face are based on choices they've made, easier to place blame, and easier to think it's their problem and it's not mine.

Not only that, but the more I fail to see the systemic roots of my own privilege, the more I fall into the trappings and expectations of it. I've been doing this my whole life. I unconsciously internalize

classism, and worry constantly about money, overworking to try to make enough to maintain luxuries I don't need but have unintentionally become accustomed to. I unconsciously internalize a Protestant work ethic, and begin to correlate my own worth to the amount of things I am 'doing'. I can become driven and ambitious about work and 'financial stability', prioritizing these above relationships, and forgetting how to relax and enjoy myself. When I allow my own privilege to be invisible, I also allow it to limit the wholeness of my life.

Likely each of us has at some point enjoyed unearned privilege, and has felt burdened by the responsibility of it, just as each of us has at some point been oppressed or marginalized, and been made to feel unworthy. There is important learning and knowing to come from each of these experiences. Reflecting personally about race, Theologian Rebecca Parker writes "Racism is a form of cultural and economic violence that isolates and fragments human beings. [...] As a white, the cure for my education into ignorance is remedial education. [...] Social activism becomes a spiritual practice by which I reclaim my humanity, and refuse to accept my cultivation into numbness and disengagement." (182)

Knowing how you benefit from injustice, and how it isolates and hardens you, is necessary in order to create a fuller life for yourself, and is necessary in doing the work you do with integrity.

## **Knowing the baggage you bring**

Similar to knowing the privileges you receive, it is important to know what baggage you bring into your work. For many of us, this ‘baggage’ is what has brought us into working on a particular issue or with a particular community. Perhaps you became an Oncology Nurse after witnessing a relative battle cancer, or you became involved in organizing for social housing while your family was being evicted to make room for condominiums. “The more personal our connection to our work, the greater the gifts we bring to it—perhaps—and the more greatly we may be impacted because of our close identification.” (van Dernoot Lipsky 41) These personal connections are important to be aware of, so that they can be utilized as a gift, and can be processed enough that they don’t wear you down. This type of self-awareness and personal development might feel overwhelming, but it is crucial in order to sustain yourself and your work in the long-run.

In addition to bringing privilege to our work and to our interactions with one another, each of us brings baggage of the struggles and oppression we have experienced, and the areas in which we have internalized a sense of powerlessness or worthlessness. Like privilege, this baggage inhibits the potential fullness of our being, it inhibits our interactions, and it gets in the way of our building relationships and creating community. It, too, is inevitable to some extent. It is also well within our ability to work through and learn from. As we become more able to notice our tender spots and to use them as a catalyst for personal development, our self- and relational-awareness widens, and we become more able to support others in doing the same. This is never ending work, and is rarely

correlated to degrees or age or job title. We are always whole, and we are always able to grow.

## Self Care

When I was working as a Youth Worker, I remember coming home more and more exhausted each day. In a sincere effort to address the issue of being tired, I started exercising, trying to go to bed earlier, taking iron-supplements, and having bubble baths. It was nice. However even I knew that the root of the issue wasn't being addressed.

In her incredible book on self-care in caring-professions, Laura van Dernoot Lipsky outlines warning signs of burn-out and breakdown. She describes hopelessness, diminished creativity, an inability to embrace complexity, chronic exhaustion, avoidance, guilt, numbing, anger, and over identifying one's self with their work.

What she is actually talking about is the impact of trauma, whether lived personally, or through ongoing exposure to the lived trauma of others. "The depth, scope, and causes are different for everyone, but the fact that we are impacted by the suffering of others—that we have a 'trauma exposure response'—is universal." (30) She reflects that, "historically, there is a widely held belief within the fields where I worked that if you're tough enough and cool enough and committed to your cause enough, you'll keep on keeping on, you'll suck it up: Self-care is something for the weaker set. I had certainly internalized this belief to a large degree, but once I realized how much the effects of trauma exposure had impacted my life, I could not return to my former relationship with my work." (29)

In my youth work it didn't take long for me to realize that I needed to be doing more to care for myself than taking bubble baths. However I put it off for years, knowing that I had no idea where to begin.

Van Dernoot Lipsky's book outlines several practices for reflecting on your relationship to your work and your life, and finding space, grounding and inspiration. Her suggestions go far beyond bubble baths, to address the core of what wears us out and what helps us thrive. Rather than paraphrase them, I will recommend that you read *Trauma Stewardship*, and refer back to it often.

## **Remembering why you do this work**

In my own life a big part of self care, and of maintaining integrity in my work without focusing on the outcomes, has been constantly reminding myself of the core beliefs that are fundamental to my involvement in justice, the spiritual grounding of my work. I consider this a fundamental practice in effective self-care. It is a ‘practice’ because it is hard to do, and requires repetition, strategy, practice. My own strategies have varied, though my favorites, à la cheesy self-help books, are leaving sticky notes around the apartment and repeating mantras on my bike ride to work. Having effective, tangible strategies is necessary, and equally important is knowing what those beliefs are for you.

First, brainstorm some of the core beliefs you have about the world, and the central reasons you are involved in the work you do. For folks with a religious or spiritual tradition, this might include teachings central to that tradition. Come up with three, or thirty, or whatever you can. Phrase them positively, and make them broad and deep. Next, start strategizing ways to remind yourself of these: a photo beside the coffee maker, a sticky-note on your bus pass, time set aside to chat with people mid-day. Be creative, and commit to cultivating these reminders. If you stop noticing a particular note, or forget why you are doing a certain thing, then change it up. Take a more scenic route, or write your reminders on brighter paper, or ask friends and colleagues to remind you of important things. Like I said, these strategies are important, but the messages are even more important. Here are two that are central to my own work and life right now:

## The Inherent Worth and Dignity of Every Person

Brazilian Educator Paulo Freire writes that necessary personal and social transformation “requires an intense faith in humankind, faith in their power to make and remake, to create and re-create, faith in their vocation to be more fully human.” (90) This faith in people is fundamental to every bit of justice work I am involved in, and remembering it makes all the difference in how I interact with people, how I spend my time, how I set goals, and how I measure my own effectiveness. (Similarly, forgetting it makes all the difference in how I treat people, and how I feel at the end of the day). Some people will tell you otherwise, that humankind is selfish and self-serving, that we are full of sin, that we are inclined toward evil. But I have seen people care about one another; I know the fear that fuels temptation and greed, and the transformation that comes from trusting and being trusted. Thomas Merton teaches me this lesson as well, saying that “our job is to love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy. That is not our business and, in fact, it is nobody's business. What we are asked to do is to love, and this love itself will render both ourselves and our neighbors worthy if anything can.” (125)

## A Love for Life

There is a spiritual and an intellectual tension about enjoyment among those who envision a better world. On the one hand we know the healing potential of joy (or love or spirit or bliss or God or whatever you want to call it), and so some suggest that all we need is for each of us to experience that personally. On the other hand we know the devastating

impact of unjust systems, and the need to fight to dismantle them at all cost.

Historically I've never leaned very far to the side of pleasure and joy. As a teenager I identified with Ani DiFranco lyrics as she sang, "If you're not angry you're just stupid or you don't care. How else can you react when you know something's so unfair?" But I've had to re-think it all a little, because I know it isn't anger that feeds me. It is a love of life. Theologian Rebecca Parker asks the critical question of what serves life? She says, "I want to know about life, and I want to live. And I want you to live. I think if we can stay with those elemental desires, not abandon them, and not let anybody take that desire away from us, then life will be served." (194-5)

## **ORGANIZATIONAL**

### **When you're part of a dysfunctional system**

The entire second half of this paper is devoted to working with organizations and systems, because inevitably we do, and all the personal development in the world will only get you so far without a strong system to support it. Healthy, supportive and effective organizational systems are necessary; they directly affect our ability to work for justice as whole and healthy people. Many of us work within organizations that, for various reasons, aren't supportive and effective. Often the reality is that we are working within organizations that mirror the dysfunction of the outside world.

What troubles me even more is that we have a hard time recognizing the dysfunction around us, and especially trying to name what the problems are, when that is all we've ever known. Our larger social structure is absurd; we think money fixes everything, we abuse power upon one another, we hoard, we attempt to motivate with fear, we hurt each other, we are hyper aware of our own inadequacies while simultaneously idolizing people we don't know, and we misdirect our longings. This is not true of all of us, not all the time, but certainly we have learned to swim comfortably in dysfunction, and to hardly recognize the waters. There is a familiarity in unhealthy systems, and without good examples of healthy functioning, we perpetuate these absurdities.

There is a very real temptation to blame these things on the organization itself, or on the situation it's immersed in. "Because of multiple and conflicting objectives, insufficient resources, and other difficulties, organizations often ask their employees and/or volunteers to perform demanding jobs without adequate support. The result is people who are unable to do their jobs as well as they would like." (van Dernooy Lipsky 43) Sound familiar? Too many things to do, without enough people and money to do it, intensifies chaos and dysfunction. So too do cramped workspaces, unclear communication, excessive bureaucracy, and inadequate supervision and feedback, but they aren't the cause.

Neither can this dysfunction be blamed on any one employee or group of people- though that would be easier. "The complexity of modern systems cannot be understood by our old ways of separating problems, or scapegoating individuals, or rearranging the boxes on an organization chart." (Wheatley 76) We refer to organizations as systems because all the various parts of them have influence over the whole thing. Not only that but they are living systems, because they are made up of living people who create within the organization a culture that evolves and changes over time. If I joined your organization and immediately started gossiping with staff members about other staff members, how would your system respond? If everyone followed suit and began gossiping, it would be difficult (and useless) to blame me specifically. The organizational culture was fragile, interpersonal relationships lacked trust, and people felt insecure. It isn't a person-problem, it's a system-problem. Fortunately, systems are changeable.

## **What a healthy system could look like**

Moving from an unhealthy culture, the idea of a healthy system is almost overwhelming. My own experience of healthy systems is limited, but not non-existent. So I am building on that, with the help and wise words of some experts. The school I did my graduate studies at had an openness in its values and actions, a willingness to experiment and admit when it was wrong, a central desire to learn as an institution and a shared desire to learn as individuals, an appreciation for where everyone was at, a leadership team that listened as much as they spoke, and an ability to create space for creative, out-of-the-box thinking. It wasn't perfect, but being immersed in it taught me a lot about healthy systems, and has made it difficult to accept anything less.

As I've said, our organizations are living systems, made up of living, dynamic people. They are not machines. "As we think of organizations as living systems, we don't discard our concern for such things as standards, measures, values, organizational structures, plans. We don't give up any of these. But we do need to change our beliefs about where these things come from. In a living system, they are generated as people figure out what will work well in the current situation. In a machine these features are designed outside and then engineered in." (Wheatley 94) Thinking about our organizations as living means considering all our plans and actions within their contexts. Unfortunately it means we can't cut-and-paste structural models or solutions to problems. Fortunately it means the possibilities are that much greater.

Healthy organizations honor their living, breathing members by making the most of all their collective potential. This means creating space for leadership where it emerges, cultivating a community with shared meaning and purpose, encouraging growth and learning, providing feedback and support, defusing fear and anxiety, and allowing for creativity. That's what we'll talk about next.

*Biologist Francisco Varela redefines organizational intelligence, saying, "It isn't the ability to solve problems that makes an organization smart. It is the ability of its members to enter into a world whose significance they share. Everyone in the group has to feel that what is occurring is significant—even as they have different perspectives." (Wheatley 92)*

## **Leadership at all levels**

I know that reflecting on organizational systems is difficult when you are right smack in the middle of one. I can picture folks in an organization I recently worked with reading all of this and responding with, “They just don’t get it” or “But he doesn’t listen”. We like to blame the problem on people, rather than on a system that needs to be improved in order for those people to be able to function at their best. We also like to place the blame outside of ourselves. “If I had the authority, I’d do this or that,” and “Well, if someone had asked me, I would have said...” Look around and consider whether these tactics are working. We all need to take responsibility.

The reality is that we want to do our work well, as does everyone else involved. There are not bad people, there are bad systems, and learning a little about the dynamics of organizational systems reinforces this.

Organizational Systems guru Barry Oshry divides the people within organizations into ‘tops’, ‘middles’, ‘bottoms’ and ‘customers’ to explain some typical patterns. He says,

“Tops are burdened by what feels like unmanageable complexity; Bottoms are oppressed by what they see as distant and uncaring Tops; Middles are torn and confused between the conflicting demands and priorities coming at them from Tops and Bottoms; Customers feel done-to by nonresponsive delivery systems. [...] Tops are fighting fires when they should be shaping the system’s future; Middles are

isolated from one another when they should be working together to coordinate system processes; Bottoms' negative feelings toward Tops and Middles distracts them from putting their creative energies into the delivery of products and services; Customers' disgruntlement with the system keeps them from being active partners in helping the system produce the products and services they need." (xiii)

Oshry explains that when we interpret these problems as being related to specific people our responses reflect that. We take things personally, judge, distance and avoid people, hire or fire people, or shuffle around responsibilities and blame. When we recognize that we have systemic problems, we take a step back and consider what our role is. Organizational systems are social structures and divisions of labour that intend to make things easier, more efficient, and more effective. Rather than being burdened tops, oppressed bottoms, and conflicted middles, we would benefit from thinking, 'how can I make it easier for others to do their work well?' and 'what would it take for our coordinated efforts to be more effective and enjoyable?'.

I've fallen into these patterns, have spent time as an oppressed bottom, and a conflicted middle, have worked for a few burdened tops, have placed blame, formed cliques, spread rumors, and denied responsibility. Never has it led to enjoying myself in my work, nor has it brought about the changes I wanted to see happen. Yet it's easy to do, especially when it is happening all around, and no one seems to be expecting anything different.

It is easiest to claim that this systems thinking is the responsibility of those at the top, those in leadership positions. To some degree that is true, in that our leaders need to be creating systems that allow people to flourish, and spaces for people to consider what that means. However we all have a role to play. A healthy organization requires leadership at all levels; it needs each of us to be active co-creators in figuring out how we should work together toward our common goals. Even the greatest idea, imposed from above, is unlikely to be as effective as one that emerges from various levels of an organization.

*“The primary task of being a leader is to make sure that the organization knows itself. That is, the leader’s task is to call people together often, so that everyone gains clarity about what they’re doing, who they’ve become and how they’re changing as they do their work.” (Wheatley 73)*

## **Communication**

Often our inability to understand one another is not the result of not talking enough, but the result of not communicating effectively and honestly. My partner often laughs at how many committees I sit on, and how many meetings I attend, when there is ‘real work to be done’! I, on the other hand, look forward to meetings, having experienced too often the disorganization and limitation of not having all the information.

My experience is that people want information. Not only the bare minimum information required to complete the tasks assigned, but more. Enough information to situate themselves within larger efforts toward something, and enough information to think creatively about their place within that, and how it could be more effective and fulfilling. With too much information, people capably sift through and take only what is needed, but without enough information people make assumptions, gossip, and panic. This doesn’t mean wasting people’s time and undermining their creativity with presentations and lectures. It means setting aside time for people to sit down together and talk about their work, testing out ideas and assumptions, processing events, and discovering ways of collaborating.

Two means for effectively facilitating group communication are dialogue and discussion. “In dialogue, there is the free and creative exploration of complex and subtle issues, a deep ‘listening’ to one another and suspending of one’s own views.” In a discussion, rather, “different views are presented and defended and there is a search for the best view to support decisions that must be made at

this time.” (Senge 220) Each of these styles has its place, and they take practice and skilled facilitation in order to bring about the best result for all involved. My experience is that when we aren’t used to these forms of communication in our organization, we need to practice, and that practice can be frustrating, but it is always worthwhile.

Part of the trouble is that the type of free-flowing conversation that ends up being most valuable goes against the grain of our usual, highly structured, problem-oriented communications. Not only does it take practice to do it well, it takes courage to suggest that it should happen at all. I confess that I haven’t always had that courage, and I hope that you are able to find it, because “collectively, we can be more insightful, more intelligent than we can possibly be individually.” (Senge 221)

## Shared Vision

Organizations working for social change rely on more than the limited resources within their budget. In order to bring about the types of communities we envision, there is a need to harness creativity, passion and energy beyond any possible job description or salary. It is this that most strongly differentiates not-for-profit organizations from the corporate world, and our effectiveness largely depends on our ability to create momentum around a shared vision.

Trouble is, you can't impose this. A shared vision is composed of the personal visions of a group of people. The energy and focus that make shared visions so powerful is not present in visions implemented from the top down. "When people truly share a vision they are connected, bound together by a common aspiration. [...] In fact, we have come to believe that one of the reasons people seek to build shared visions is their desire to be connected in an important undertaking." (Senge 192) It's win-win-win. In our work and our organizations we are seeking to motivate, enliven and inspire people, knowing that is when they are most effective. Similarly, in our lives we are seeking meaning and purpose, as well as connection and community. Authentically building shared vision among a group, and regularly returning with them to reconsider that vision, accomplishes all of these goals.

This is not only successful in small organizations, it has been a vital component of all social change movements. What we hear about are the charismatic leaders and their dreams for the future, but when they were successful it was because these charismatic

leaders worked with educators and organizers, and these people were gathering groups of people to talk about their own visions and their own dreams for the future. “Individuals do not sacrifice their personal interests to the larger team vision; rather, the shared vision becomes an extension of their personal visions. In fact, alignment is the necessary condition before empowering the individual will empower the whole team.” (Senge 217-218)

Within organized or institutional settings, this is unlikely to happen on its own. A shared vision needs space to emerge, and facilitators to help it emerge. It also requires people to have a strong sense of self-awareness and personal vision. It demands that organizations be committed to individual and group learning.

## **Learning Organizations**

Organizational systems professor Peter Senge suggests that most organizations learn poorly, and that, “often the harder they try to solve problems, the worse the results.” (18) Senge further outlines that “organizations learn only through individuals who learn. Individual learning does not guarantee organizational learning. But without it no organizational learning occurs.” (Senge 129)

Having been a part-time student for so many years, and having worked within the public school system, I’ve often taken learning for granted. In Canada’s public schools there are regular professional-development days, where staff are able to choose between a variety of workshops to attend, and where time is set aside to plan and collaborate within groupings. In the United Church of Canada, where I’ve also worked, the general policy is for staff to receive a set amount of continuing education time each year, as well as a set amount of funding to cover the cost of books, resources, workshops, that support the employee’s education and development within their field. I’ve seen the benefits of these practices on my own effectiveness, and continue to advocate for them being implemented and used.

Worthwhile individual learning is about technical knowledge, as well as personal growth, clarifying beliefs and assumptions about the world, and continually seeing current situations more clearly. It is the development of critical thinking skills, enrichment of emotional awareness, and increased ability to work within the creative tension between our visions and the current reality. While this type of learning cannot be forced upon individuals in an

organization, there are ways that it can be practiced and encouraged. Senge suggests that this means, “building an organization where it is safe for people to create visions, where inquiry and commitment to the truth are the norm, and where challenging the status quo is expected.” (162)

As important as individual learning and personal development are, it is also necessary for members of an organization to be learning as a team. This means setting aside time for people to share knowledge about their work, bringing in outsiders to lead discussions (not present information) about important issues in the field, or about evolving practices and approaches. As a leader it means finding out what people are interested in learning about, and then creating opportunities for them to do so. As an individual it means thinking about what you are interested in learning about, communicating that, and then finding opportunities for such learning. The good thing is that when this learning happens collectively, it improves communication and trust amongst a group, and helps build a shared vision. So it's not as though each of these are separate undertakings that a healthy organization has to commit to. Each of them are part of a paradigm shift that acknowledges that the organization is a living system, and that the life within it needs to be tended and cared for in order to flourish.

*“At the point of encounter there are neither utter ignoramuses nor perfect sages; there are only people who are attempting, together, to learn more than they now know.” (Friere 90)*

## **Creating systems for feedback and assessment**

We all want to be able to go home at the end of the day knowing we've made the most of what that day held, that we've accomplished what was possible, that our work is congruent with larger goals, and that it is creating movement in the direction we intend. The challenge is that even when we know the value of evaluating these things, we rarely set-up effective systems for that purpose. When we do set-up these systems, our busy schedules become an excuse for avoiding them anyways. "We learn best from experience but we never directly experience the consequences of many of our most important decisions." (Senge 23) We also rarely have the ability to measure the real and long-term impact of our work, making it difficult to learn from it, and difficult to assess our effectiveness. The impact of this can be extremely discouraging, especially when there is always more to be done.

Adding to our lack of awareness about our own effectiveness is the inevitability of what political scientist Michael Lipsky calls 'service rationing'. Lipsky uses this term to describe "the process workers go through to balance the everyday contradictions between trying to do their work to the best of their ability and managing all the obstacles that keep them from realizing this ultimate goal." (van Dernoort Lipsky 43) His research shows that, "people desperately need a work environment that recognizes that compromises are inevitable and helps workers achieve their own personal satisfaction and do good work on behalf of their clients." (45)

At the elementary school, my office was in the front hallway, and our practice was to keep the door open for kids, parents and staff to

drop in and chat. Based on the frequency with which those drop-ins happened, and the intensity of the issues people brought up while there, we knew it was important and worthwhile. We also knew that the casual and inviting nature of this practice brought in more people than setting up formal appointments. We also had all sorts of other things to get done: programs to plan, grant applications to complete, referrals to make, endless emails to read. We rationed our time, and didn't always know if we were rationing it well.

Knowing that there are always limits to time and resources, and acknowledging that at times some level of 'service rationing' will happen, we can create systems and policies such that this happens ethically and that we are intentional about it. This might look like setting aside a specific chunk of time each day to leave the paper work and spend time face to face with people. It could mean setting a few realistic and achievable goals for each day, to create focus with tangible outcomes, and to spend a few moments at the end of the day reflecting on them.

In order to make our reflection and feedback effective, we need to plan strategically, knowing that things will get in the way and excuses will present themselves. On an individual level this might mean finding someone else to reflect with at the end of each day, so that you are accountable to one another to make it happen. It may also mean creating a basic structure for that conversation, so that it doesn't become venting or gossiping. At an organizational level it means formally creating relationships of both accountability and support, and building times and spaces for reflection and feedback into the weekly schedule. The more regularly reflective

discussions and assessment occur, the more helpful (and less frightening) they will be.

Lastly, work on creating an organizational culture that celebrates its successes, and where people encourage each other's accomplishments. We know that not everything will get done, and that people will experience frustration and disappointment because of it. AND there are amazing people around you, and amazing things happening. Remind yourself and each other of that.

## **A non-anxious presence**

There is deep anxiety in our culture, continually being reinforced by the mainstream media's messages that we have a scarcity of resources, that we should fear violence and pain, and that we cannot trust anything. Chances are great that there is anxiety in the communities where we work, and in the communities where we live. Studies show that 15-20% of North American adults in any given year experience some form of anxiety disorder, and many more experience situational (acute) or chronic anxiety. Given the amount of things we could possibly worry about, author Harriet Lerner jokes that simply to be alive in our time is to have an anxiety disorder. (Lerner 59)

The need for a non-anxious presence in our lives and our organizations is enormous. Author Peter Steinke explains, "the non-anxious presence is a description of how a person works to keep the center of control within oneself and as a way to affect relationships in a positive manner." (31) He elaborates that "to be a non-anxious presence means to acknowledge anxiety but not let it be the driver of behavior." (36) In practice it is challenging to remain non-anxious, and there are individual and organizational lessons we can glean from the idea. These include managing our own reactions, remaining calm in problem solving and conflict, reflecting before reacting, tolerating high levels of uncertainty and frustration, maintaining a clear sense of direction, and sharing information as a means of reducing the uncertainty of others.

Our workaholic culture has a way of glorifying stress and anxiety by equating it with responsibility and importance. Don't buy into

this. Instead, find within yourself and your organizations a calming presence, slow down ever so slightly, and notice what a difference it makes.

*“To allow ourselves 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 the violence of our times.” (Merton)*

## **Space for creativity and experimentation**

Knowing that we haven't got it all figured out, knowing that our approaches and techniques can always be improved upon, I am a huge advocate of creatively experimenting. This has forced me to be comfortable with sometimes getting it wrong. The two go together. "When people are immersed in a vision, they often don't know how to do it. They run an experiment. They change direction and run another experiment. Everything is an experiment, but there is no ambiguity. It's perfectly clear why they are doing what they are doing. [...] Everybody knows that there is no guarantee. But the people are committed nonetheless." (Senge 195)

This is how we get better, and how we really grow. We have to be willing to be wrong, and we need to create organizational culture that reinforces that it's alright to not get it right, as long as we keep on trying. A culture of creativity and experimentation empowers people to take responsibility for acting upon that gap between their vision and the current reality.

This type of culture, however, requires trust. "It's become commonplace to say that people resist change, that the organization lacks the right people to move it into the future, that people no longer assume responsibility for their work, that people are too dependent, that all they do is whine." (Wheatley 83) The problem isn't that people resist change, but that they want to be respected and trusted enough to become creatively involved in it. "Trusting people is the indispensable precondition for [change]. A real humanist can be identified more by his trust in the people which

engages him in their struggle, than by a thousand actions in their favor without that trust.” (Friere 60)

As a leader this means loosening control over both the problems and the solutions, and facilitating new approaches to them. “Leadership through command and control is doomed to fail. No one can create sufficient stability and equilibrium for people to feel secure and safe. Instead, as leaders we must help people move into a relationship with uncertainty and chaos.” (Wheatley 126) Embracing creativity and experimentation is a means of doing just that. “Every change, every burst of creativity, begins with the identification of a problem or opportunity that somebody finds meaningful. As soon as people become interested in an issue, their creativity is engaged. If we want people to be innovative, leaders must engage them in meaningful issues.” (Wheatley 77) It is in that place, where people who are passionate about an issue are given (or find) the space, guidance and responsibility to work together to address it, that change happens, and we move closer to the world that we wish to inhabit. This is the opportunity within a living system.

**Conclusion: A responsibility to enjoy yourself.**

All of this work toward healthy and flourishing people, in healthy and functioning organizations and community systems, requires a few very specific things of each of us. It requires you to love what you are spending your time doing, enjoy being part of it, and commit to making it work. If these pieces are missing, you will be of no use, you will be setting up your own failures, and you will likely be miserable along the way. Life is too short to be miserable. And all the pain, struggle and suffering in the world is no excuse for it. You have a responsibility to enjoy yourself.

A healthy system will encourage you to experience joy and connection. It will inspire goals and visions within you, and honor and challenge you to rise to the challenge of realizing them. It will provide opportunities for growth and learning, for communication and collaboration, for creative experimentation. It will meet you in your own search for meaning and purpose, and create a community for you around that. And, when done well, it should find you enjoying yourself.

Then, enjoying yourself, you will be able to be in the present without focusing exclusively on the results. Enjoying yourself, you will more easily find an outlook of compassion and humility. Enjoying yourself, you will carry more honestly both the baggage and the privilege that you bring. Enjoying yourself, you will be caring for yourself, and you will find it takes less effort to remember why you spend your time on the important work that you do. Enjoying yourself you will be that much more capable of all that you are so very capable of.



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