a ulex resource

TRANSFORMATIVE COLLABORATION

A PRIMER

integral activist training

TRANSFORMATIVE COLLABORATION

A PRIMER

The collective problems we face involve collective solutions. Effective collaboration is empowering. It offers the necessary means to influence social change. It is a context where we can embody our values and find channels for creative and meaningful engagement with the challenges of our lives. When it goes well it is a space where we and those around us can truly flourish.

All too often, however, we find ourselves ill equipped to work well together. Our groups and organisations can become stuck in entrenched conflicts. Enthusiasm and trust become worn down by hidden and overt power dynamics. Effort becomes misdirected into competition for status and influence. And, dishearteningly, we sometimes witness the reproduction of the kinds of oppressive social relations we are working to change in the world.

How can we collaborative in ways that can have real social impact and enable us to flourish as individuals? How can we make our collaborative efforts truly expressive of our values? How can collaboration enhance our personal and collective agency?

These are the questions that the **Transformative Collaboration** trainings seek to address – using participatory and holistic pedagogies. This article draws on that work and sketches out some of the ideas and approaches that inform it.

At its simplest collaboration means working with others to achieve something. In this work we are mostly interested in exploring this in relation to work for greater social justice and ecological integrity. Collaboration functions on various levels – teams, groups and organisations, forming alliances, building networks and the dynamics of social movements. Here we explore collaboration mostly in terms of groups, teams and organisations (although some of the principles are scalable).

We are not offering prescriptive answers - although there are specific recommendations - but rather a framework that can be used to reflect and learn more deeply from experience of collaborative work.

Fields of Attention

> The collective problems we face involve collective solutions. Effective collaboration is empowering. It offers the necessary means to influence social change.

To understand and put in place the conditions to support effective collaboration, there are four fields we need to attend to. The obvious area is the group field itself, but we also need to attend to the wider socio-political field, the inter-personal field, and the personal dimension (internal and psychological).

Wider Socio-Political Field: This often frames purpose and shapes the strategic options we are able to envisage. It places pressures on our work and offers opportunities. The flow of resources and timeframe influenced by these 'external' factors are strong determinants. Additionally it is important to notice the way that this field has conditioned the individual and relational tendencies in our groups. It is helpful to ask: What dynamics of the prevalent socio-political structures do we inadvertently reproduce and how do we change that conditioning in helpful ways? It is important to note that at this historical juncture we come to collaborative work in the wake of several decades of neoliberal social policies which have socialised all of us in an increasingly individualistic direction. We need to become conscious of what this and other influences mean for our work together.

Group/Organisational Field: Learning to recognise and interpret the dynamics of the group field is very important. Some of this is the more quantitative dimension of the group or organisational culture and the values this expresses. But there are also the structures and practices that shape this field: protocols, accountabilities, decision making methods, etc.

Interpersonal Field: This lies between the personal and the group field. It is distinct from the group field but highly conditions it. The inter-personal is about the more personal and relational dynamics between us as individuals and often requires atten-

tion outside of group life itself. These personal layers of relationship will have a strong bearing on group life. The existence of trust or distrust, the sometimes hard to pin down sense of rapport or aversion, the triggers and attractions that pull and push us around, all have an effect.

Personal-Psychological Field: And finally, of course, there is what we each bring to the above. Our communication styles, our skills, and our psychological tendencies are all important. There is deep conditioning that effect the way we are in groups, the roles we adopt, the ways we respond. We need to be able to reflect on the individual tendencies we bring to our collaborations. We need to be able to recognise when our behavioural strategies and psychological tendencies are unhelpful, and learn to transform them. Where they are beneficial, we need to the means to strengthen and cultivate them more fully. Developing greater self-awareness and emotional literacy is crucial in freeing us from merely habitual reactions and becoming able to make better and more empowering choices about how we act and interact in our collaborative relationships.

And, of course, in good systems thinking style, we need to attend to the interplay between these four fields. Each layer or field has its own systemic integrity, and yet nests within the higher levels, where wholes become parts of larger wholes. The boundaries between these fields are permeable to influence, which can run in both directions. Understanding and learning to work skilfully with this flow of influence is a key to creating effective collaborative situations.

Transformative Collaboration

To collaborate effectively we need to explore our capacity to make changes at each of these levels: the personal, the group, and the wider socio-political sphere. We use the term *transformative collaboration* to point to collaboration towards change for social and ecological benefit. But we also use it to acknowledge the importance of the collaborative context as a space for organisational and personal transformation. Effective collaboration usually involves our own personal development and changing the ways we work together. Transformative collaboration is about change at each of these levels and the mutually reinforcing benefits a systemic approach can have. It is about discovering how the life of our groups and organisations can be the very ground out of which a more collaborative capacity, personal and collective, can arise.

> To collaborate effectively we need to explore our capacity to make changes at each of these levels: the personal, the group, and the wider socio-political sphere.

Going for the Good of the Whole

Collaboration for positive social change is generally rooted in values like justice, equality and freedom. In this work we assume a strong altruistic commitment and concern to act in solidarity with others. A systems thinking approach underpins much of this work, so we add a systems-like value which we see as integral to really fulfilling our collaborative potential: Going for the Good of the Whole.

The phase "Going for the Good of the Whole" is lifted from the work of the systems scientist Donella Meadows, who co-authored *The Limits to Growth* (and the 30 years update published in 2004). It was one of the first comprehensive studies that popularized awareness of the deep irrationality of a growth based economic and industrial system in a world of non-negotiable ecological limits.

Towards the end of her life she was working on a primer for systems thinking. It was intended to help people to think in ways that really honored the interconnected and relational nature of the world. One of the chapters, *Living in a World of Systems*, offers a set of maxims which can guide us to cultivate an approach that takes the systemic nature of life seriously and, so, engage more intelligently and effectively.

Meadows was a scientist whose work is full of heart and informed by a profound ethical sensibility. Amongst the maxims we find suggestions like: *Expose Your Mental Models to the Light of Day*; *Make Feedback Policies for Feedback Systems*; or *Stay Humble – Stay a Learner*. And there she offers this key piece of advice: *Go for the Good of the Whole*. This is a powerful maxim. It suggests both an attitude and a way of seeing – both of which, we believe, will enhance our efforts to collaborate.

Why Collaborate?

Collaboration is challenging. We need a powerful sense of its value, a clear vision of its purpose, and strong commitment to see us through the difficult times. So let's start by asking the important question: Why collaborate?

In answer to this we propose 5 reasons. Collaboration offers:

1. a key to effectiveness and empowerment
2. a vital support for personal transformation
3. a necessary context for the embodiment of values
4. a means to align with interconnectedness
5. source of synergy and creativity


effectiveness and empowerment
embodiment of values
why collaborate?
honour interconnectedness
synergy and creativity
personal transformation

1. A key to effectiveness and empowerment

This is perhaps the most obvious reason we turn towards collaborative work. Simply enough, if we coordinate our efforts with others we can often amplify our impact. When many of us work well together we get more done. We combine experience, skill sets, more hands and energy, more person hours, and so on.

If we think in terms of a simple strategic scheme which depicts the relationship between our sphere of concern and our sphere of influence we can see how working with others will tend to increase our sphere of influence. At its most basic, collaboration offers all the increased effectiveness and empowerment of good team work and coordination.

At another level, joining together has additional socio-political value at this point in time. Since the 1970's, from its birth during the Thatcher-Reagan years, the laissez faire economic ideology which came to be known as neoliberalism has had a powerful effect on the shape of society. Social scientists refer to the phenomena of 'social recession'. Studies, like Robert Putnham's *Bowling Alone*, have documented a marked decline in public participation in many 'civil society' institutions and activities. Active participation in local charities and associations shows a marked decline, as does participation in many forms of political organising.

One way to view this is to imagine a simplified three tier model of society. The top tier represents large scale national and transnational entities (the state, corporations, financial institutions, etc...). The bottom tier represents individuals and their atomised actions and choices (consumerism, representational voting, tv viewing habits, etc...). The middle tier represents the field of collective social participation (trade unions, political parties, campaign groups, local association). The effect of the 'social recession' has been to depopulate this central field and in doing so close off pathways to effective social impact from the lives of most people. The opportunities for collective action and collective agency have been lost. The 'repopulation' of this field is a critical political imperative. Collaborative projects make an important contribute to this repopulation.

In 2009 Mark Fischer coined the phrase 'reflexive impotence'. He was describing a prevalent experience in contemporary society. We are all-too-well informed about the failings and irrationalities of our times. We're deeply conscious of them - and self-

conscious of our complicity. And yet, ways to meaningfully influence what's going on seem elusive. We're left (frustrated) accepting this is probably how it's bound to be. We resign ourselves, perhaps with some discomfort, to our part in it all, as onlookers - from the penumbra of a 'reflexive impotence'.

Apathy and cynicism about the state of the world says more about the lack of meaningful pathways to action than it says about people's lack of care or vision. Where the field of collaborative engagement has been depopulated, channels for meaningful action are blocked. When frustration and discontent have no conduit towards meaningful expression, the energy and anger often turns inwards, back against our selves. Or it just gets shut down, supressed. When we reconstruct channels for collective agency we can release that energy, simultaneously helping to restore personal vitality and the power of community.

2. Context for Transformation & Development

Not only is collaboration a necessary basis for social transformation, it is also a powerful context for the transformation and growth of individuals. That people shape societies, while societies shape people is a truism of the social sciences. The values of social justice and ecological sustainability have embedded in them the valuing of both human and ecological flourishing. The wellbeing of society cannot be detached from the wellbeing of the individuals who make it up – and vice versa.

Collaborative work for social justice and ecological integrity can constitute vital social relationships which will help each of us to bring out the best in ourselves.

Collaborative work for social justice and ecological integrity can constitute vital social relationships which will help each of us to bring out the best in ourselves. We cannot realise that potential alone. We need both the support and the challenges offered by close association with others. When we know how to put the right conditions in place the inevitable challenges of working with others helps us to recognise and transform our own limitations. Grounding our work in shared values – such as 'going for the good of the whole' - creates conditions for our own flourishing, where action becomes a source of fulfilment. As Alice Walker put it: "Resistance is one of the secrets of joy."

Of course, setting up these conditions is not easy. But these trainings help us to understand the key principles and latticework of practices that can make it more possible.

Transformative friendship

The importance of association based on shared values for our personal growth is articulated in traditions across the world. In the Buddhist tradition (which can be understood as a methodology for the realisation of human potential) personal relationship, based on ethical commitment, is seen as one of the key factors in supporting individuals to grow. In a famous passage the Buddha's attendant Ananda says to the Buddha, "it is wonderful that spiritual friendship is half of the spiritual life." The Buddha replies, "say not so Ananda, it is not half of the spiritual life, it is the whole of the spiritual life!"

Aristotle identified three levels of friendship: friendship based on utility; friendship based on pleasure; and friendship based on 'the good' or ethical commitment. When we come together to act on the basis of deeply shared values we create the context for the kind of relationships that he regarded as the highest and truest expression of friendship. That is the kind of friendship that supports us to grow into the kind of people who are truly capable of embodying our ideals

Healing alienation

We can look at social engagement through the lens of healing alienation. It is easy to see how the lifestyles and structures of an industrial growth and exploitative society leads to alienation at three levels: the ecological, the social and the psychological. Social transformation involves healing the connections of: people to themselves; people to people; and people to nature. Collaboration is a space that addresses both the social and psychological dimensions of that process. When we create a collaborative culture, grounded in compassion, we are generating the kind of safe spaces people need to know themselves more deeply, and to really bring out their own potential.

Maturing into inter-connectedness

Mature individuals grow beyond narrow narcissistic self-preoccupation. They also grow beyond the dysfunctionality of self-sacrifice and self-depreciation. Situations where we can learn how to come into free association with others are important for this kind of maturation – where we experience the fullness of our individuality and the value of the collective, where we learn to live in the tensions between autonomy and cooperation.

3. Embodiment of Values

There are some values that we can't embody alone. Solidarity, for example, can only be embodied between us. The embodiment of these values is a powerful form of resistance to the values we seek to transform in society. When we come together we create cultures and communities. We develop the discourses and practices that redefine who we are. In a world so strongly conditioned by life damaging values, creating communities of practice which embody life-affirming values is a vital form of direct refusal and recreation.

Solidarity is a value that enables us to carry political cultures beyond ideas of natural community. It is a basis of association that can embrace difference and diversity. It is a value that goes beyond sentimental attachment towards a deeper affinity. Embodying solidarity only happens when we test our commitment to it in the fires of collaborative challenge. It is no good to us as an abstraction. We need to feel its galvanising power express itself in specific choices, in specific forgiveness, in concrete affirmations.

There are some values that we can't embody alone. Solidarity can only be embodied between us.

At the same time there is an important place in collaborative work for the affective. For our associations to express life-affirming values, they need to take seriously the radical power that feminism points to in the qualities of care, self-care and kindness. In our collaborative relationships we can create spaces where these more tender qualities can overthrow the utilitarian and dominatory structures of all too many of our social relations. In this we cease to reproduce the old order.

When we begin to embody our values together we enable ourselves and others to begin to escape the hegemony of late-capitalist imagination. The neoliberal order has sought to confirm a powerful bias in the view of humanity – that we are fundamentally competitive and selfish beings. The socio-economic structures we have grown within conditions us in this direction, confirming the view and trashing the possibility of something else. But our transformative collaborative practices bring out the best in us and in doing so fire up the radical imagination.

Through effective embodiment of our values – even imperfectly – we gain a sense and intuition of what is possible, we reclaim who we can be. To overcome the views of ourselves and the world that we have internalised from capitalism, we need exemplifying new social structures to support us to regain faith in our own potential. These structures both reshape

us today and express what we might become tomorrow.

In the early part of this century it was common to see late-capitalism as a global hegemonic force. The historic failures of the left, together with the inability to articulate alternatives able to resist co-option or marginalisation, meant that capitalism came to delineate the 'horizon of the thinkable'. Experience of different kinds of collective initiatives failing, stalling or collapsing (through internal bickering, disappointments, or an inability to weather the repressive context for example) inscribed that horizon line ever more firmly for many people.

The creation and sustaining of collaborative projects, based in the ethic of going for the good of the whole, are the ground out of which a renewal of the radical imagination can grow. To reopen the horizon of thought beyond the disillusionments that have led to the thwarting of the radical imagination is an important task. Reactivating the radical imagination is a social task, something that we do together. Through collaboration we can rekindle our sense of what is possible. We can offers examples and embodiment of values that inspire and have value beyond themselves. It can help us restore confidence in who we are and what we can become - a crucial first step in transforming the world.

4. Honouring Connection

One of the best ways to describe the paradigmatic shift, from the world view underpinning the irrationalities of the industrial growth society towards a new life affirming vision, is to frame it as a reemphasis on connection. The reductive and atomising view of the old scientific paradigm is gradually being superseded by more relational ways of understanding life – such as ecological and systems thinking. The emerging ecological paradigm explores things as they arise in context. It studies the interplay and connections between things – people and societies, species and ecosystems, meaning and language. It suggests fresh ideas of what constitutes identity, meaning, agency and causality.

Conditioned as we are by the old way of seeing things as discrete entities playing upon each other, we remain stuck in a vision of the world that pits us against each other. We struggle to assert our will or lament its failures. When we collaborate we realign ourselves with ways of understanding the world as arising from connections. When we come together collaboratively we are rethinking who we are, how influence and choice intersect, and how individual and collective experience inform each other.

> When we collaborate we realign ourselves with ways of understanding the world as arising from connections.

One of our key challenges today is to deconstruct our sense of separateness and to re-enliven our sense of connection. Collaboration is a space that enables us to do both. Through collaboration we honour the vision of connection integral to ecological thinking, we discover a renewed sense of agency that incorporates the self and yet goes beyond it.

At the individual level the old paradigm haunts us in the conceit of our agency. We build our sense of self through the appropriation of our achievements to our frailly constructed self. At the personal level ecological thinking expresses itself in humility. When we collaborate we learn the power of humility. It puts our feet on the ground. We find our own self woven into a fabric of connection. And rather than diminish us it supports us to flourish in the enriching medium of relationships. It helps us to free ourselves from the imprisonment of a narrow ego into a fuller sense of interconnected individuality. When we see our action combined with that of others we antidote the tendency to appropriate outcomes to our small self and find the release of creativity that arises out of acknowledging the conditioned basis of all experience.

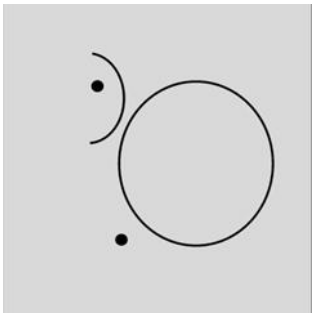
Honouring the complexity of systems suggests an epistemological humility. It is said: “It’s not that

cosystems are more complex than you think they are; it's that they are more complex than you can think." This kind of epistemological humility need not crush us into fatalistic pessimism. But it does suggest that we learn to hold lightly to our views, recognising them as partial and provisional. It suggests we augment our own thinking through exposing our ideas to the light of day in debate and discussion. It suggests that we might think better together.

Simplistic models of agency tend to function with reductive notions of linear cause and effect. An "if I do this that will happen," kind of thinking. Obviously this works well up to a point. But the more complex the task, the more elements involved, the more such an approach leads to failure and frustration. For some it leads to a sense of futility. For others it prompts ever more desperate attempts to force things to conform to our wishes and our simplistic world view centred on ourselves. In the worst cases this shows up in forms of controlling behaviour, from petty emotional blackmailing to authoritarian dictatorship. Honouring a world of connections and complexity takes us beyond the conceit of control and its ethical aberrations. When we honour connection and complexity a whole world of creative conditioned relationships begin to surface: the world of mutual co-dependence, co-production, non-linear dynamics.

The shift from control to collaboration, decentring the world from ourselves, has both an ethical and a creative dimension.

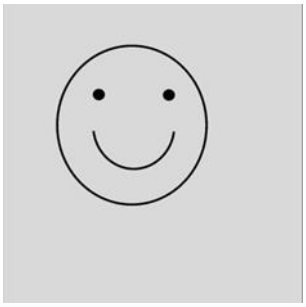
5. Synergy & Creativity



We often enough hear the adage: The whole is greater than the sum of the parts. It seems like a simple enough idea, but actually reveals something quite mysterious about the creative dimension of experience. One of the simplest ways I know of exploring this mystery of arising is to draw a random configuration on a piece of paper showing a curve, a dot, a circle and another dot. An abstract arrangement of elements is seen. Then, when we redraw the same elements again in a different arrangement something else emerges.

Although it is a disarmingly childish exercise, we shouldn't neglect to notice something quite fascinating happening here. Obviously we see a face. But where has this face come from? How is it sustained? Where is it?

As we can see from the first drawing the face is not just an assemblage of the parts: circle, dots, and curve. It arises out of the perceived relationship between them; their relative size and orientation; our cognitive predispositions and culturally conditioned semiotic assumptions; and so on.



It is self-evident that a face appears. And yet, when we look for the face we cannot find the face 'in itself'. Breaking the face back down into its parts it disappears. This is how most of our experience arises – born of relationships without any 'ultimate' existence. In fact, all things lack existence except as they arise from interdependent relationship. We can go more deeply into this we can analyse each of the 'parts' and find that they too arise in this same way, and that consequently have no existence 'in themselves'.

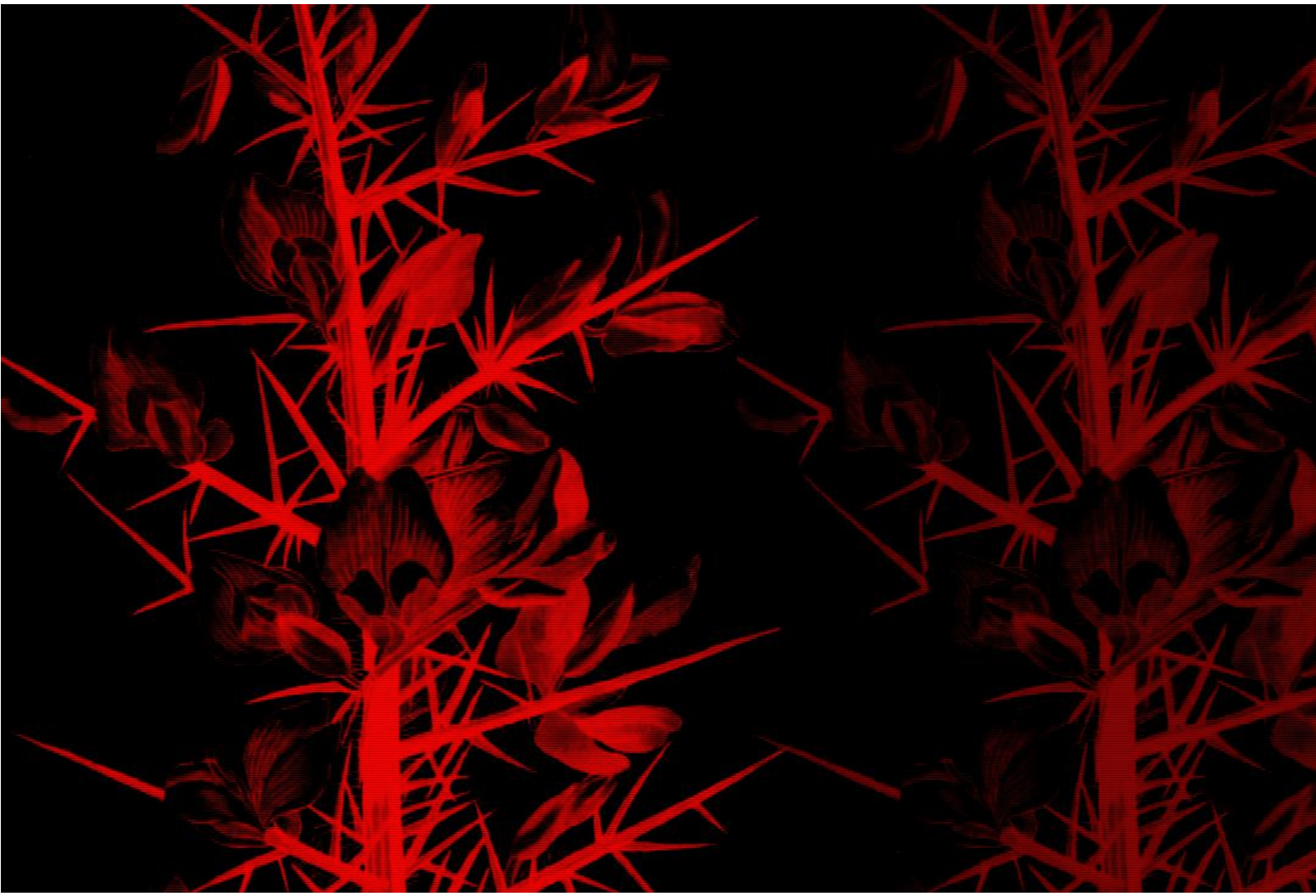
There is mystery in these emergent phenomena, even just considering a set of dots and curves on a page. How much more so in complex ecological or social phenomena? Enriching levels of creative complexity emerge in more complex relations. When we collaborate we create a ground of relationships out of which emerge conditions that are far more than the sum of the parts.

Scientifically emergence is recognised as a basic component of increasing complexity. As it is said, it is not possible to predict the properties of water from the properties of its constituent elements – hydrogen and oxygen. In the combining of different and diverse elements we get more than mere aggregation, we get the creation of something quite new.

There are ways of talking about this such as 'the wisdom of the group', or ways of organising which use the analogy of 'swarming'. Currently numerous facilitation methodologies are being developed that seek to draw on the deep creativity that becomes possible between and (in a sense) beyond us. Methods like The Art of Hosting or Dragon Dreaming. They all emphasise the importance of individual contribution, but seek to optimise the creative connections between us to release creativity that none of us can achieve alone – that actually can't exist at the individual level. Diversity and difference are vital here. As in the health and resilience of ecosystems, the level of diversity and the multiplicity of connections that run through a group contribute creative potential and resilience too.

Some traditions have thought of these processes as involving some kind of trans-personal dimension. While there is an experiential truth in these ways of thinking they often fall into the essentialist trap of assuming some kind of metaphysical and really existing thing or force at play. The understanding I am pointing to here suggests that what arises has no self-nature, it too emerges or arises in dependence upon the conditions that come together and yet transcend them – simultaneously!

When we bring this kind of understanding to our collaborative work we can begin to sense this quality of emergence arising between us. In the combination of our actions, we can sense something important about agency: that we act and influence but cannot control, and that in the realisation of responsibility along with the impossibility of appropriating outcomes a truly creative dimension of collaborative work can reveal itself to us.



Transformative Groups

Having looked at some of the reasons and motivations for collaboration, we might gain a deepened recognition of its value – and from that a renewed sense of commitment and determination. We're going to need it! Because effective collaboration isn't easy – and, of course, that is the main reason for these trainings.

In this section we explore some of the challenges that face us when we join together in collaborative efforts to "Go for the Good of the Whole". And then we'll sketch out some of the practices and approaches that can support us.

Transformation

We often don't begin our collaborative relationships as accomplished collaborators. But we can create a collaborative context within which we can learn and grow into great collaborators. This is what the idea of Transformative Collaboration emphasises – in our efforts to transform the world we need to also be transforming ourselves. When set up the collaborative context well it becomes the context for our growth into individuals and groups able to realise our values and have an effective impact on the world around us.

Certainly there will be failures and disappointments. So from the start we need to ask: what conditions will help turn these experiences into learning rather than dejection?

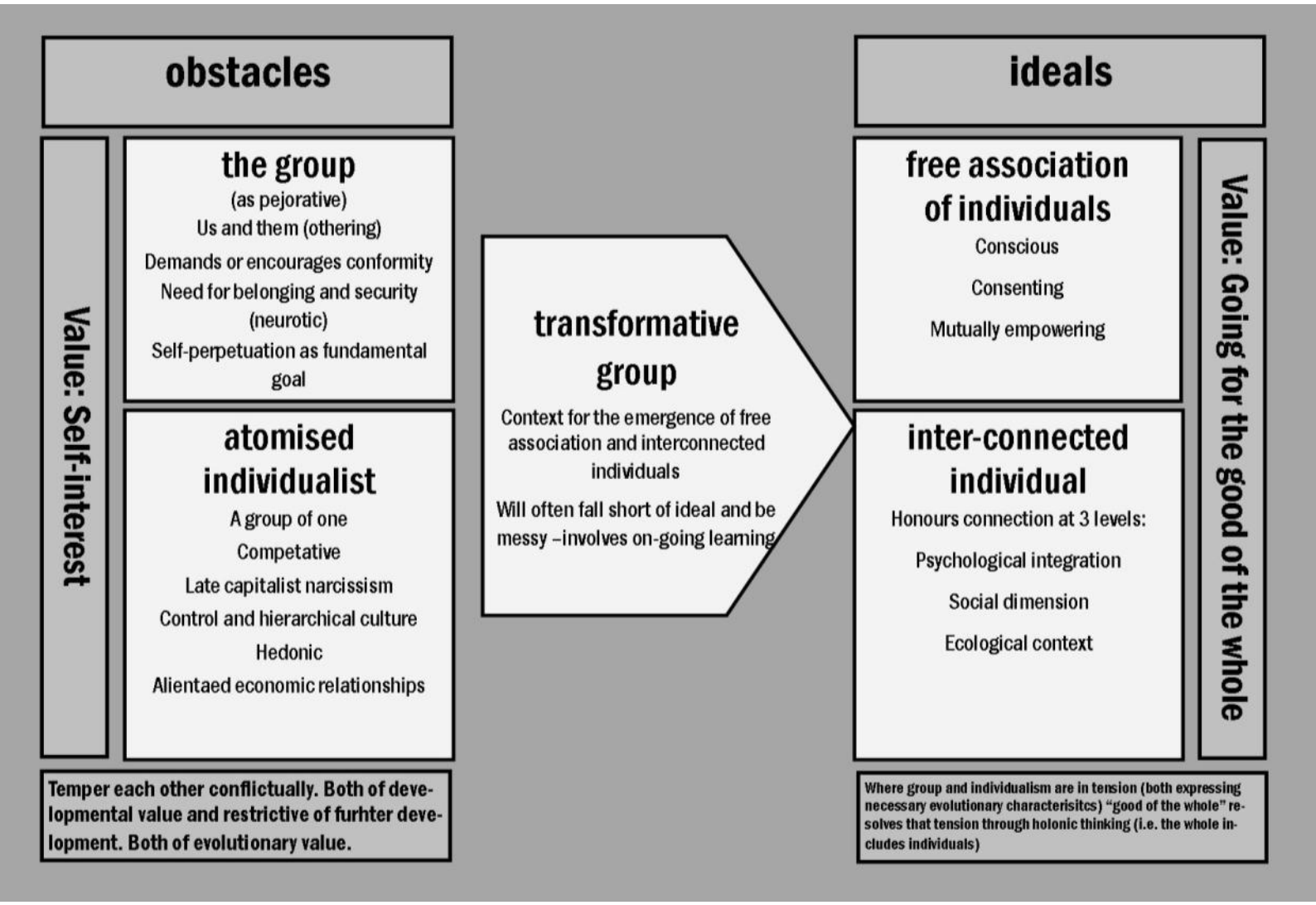
When we speak of Transformative Collaboration we're speaking holistically. This means that the idea of transformation is being applied to multiple levels simultaneously – and that each of these levels is mutually reinforcing. This is expressed in the core value of "going for the good of the whole". The whole includes the levels of individual, the group or organization, and the wider social and ecological setting. A holistic approach to transformation attends to the interplay of these levels and the way we can use their interrelationship to support transformation at each level.

Collaboration *is* a means to an end – in the sense that through collaboration we transform ourselves and society. But it is also an end in itself, in that it is through collaboration that we can embody core values and flourish individually and collectively. But many of us are aware of just how hard this is. How often do we find that the groups we come together

in replicate many of the failures of the society we're seeking to change? We find entrenched conflicts, hidden power dynamics, unproductive competition for status and influence, the breakdown of trust, and the disheartening reproduction of oppressive social relations (perhaps most obviously in terms of sexism and racism).

So, how can we make the context of our collaborative efforts truly expressive of our values? How can we create collaborative relationships that enable us to flourish as individuals and empower our collective capacity for social change?

Clearly there are few final and prescriptive answers. What is offered here is a framework we can use to reflect more deeply on the issues involved and enhance our learning and practice.



Ideals

The framework for understanding the idea of Transformative Groups begins by sketching an ideal, something to work towards. The value of ideals is not to create something we can undermine ourselves with by comparing ourselves to it and lamenting our failures to achieve them! Their value lies in being suggestive of a direction. They help us to orientate our efforts. In this framework we explore this ideal in terms of two interconnected dimensions: The Collective and the Individual.

Collective Ideal: Free Association

The ideal proposed for the collective level is Free Association. This idea is well known from the political traditions of Anarchism, which clearly has complex and varied connotations. The political ideals of Anarchism are often popularly misrepresented as a delight in disorder - connected with lawlessness and social chaos. The early European anarchists of the 19th and early 20th centuries were most commonly associated with assassination attempts and efforts to ferment rebellion and revolution – and, often, a poor ability to offer coherent models of transition beyond the upsetting of the existing order. It has often found expression in strong antagonistic relationship to the power structures in society, commonly taking the form of insurrectional mobilisation. In modern times it has often deteriorated into forms of individualistic libertarianism or what Murray Bookchin called “lifestyle anarchism”.

Anyone who has given the tradition more than a cursory study finds that there are important strands of anarchist thinking and practice that are highly moral and grounded in a strong social ethic. The writer and thinker Kropotkin established the idea of anarcho-communism. It avoids the individualistic limitations of individualistic forms of anarchism by emphasising the idea of mutual aid. At its heart is a strong moral case for living in solidarity with others and establishing social and economic relations that are just and mutually empowering.

Anarchism critiques social hierarchies and the rule of law to the extent that laws and social hierarchy institutionalise oppressive and exploitative social relationships – deeply unjust distributions of wealth and power. In its exploration and critiques of the dynamics of power – both external and internalised – anarchism points towards a lofty evaluation of what human association can be like.

The ideal of free association involves social relationships that are free of coercion. They are mutually empowering in that the distribution of social wealth and opportunities are achieved through dialogue and agreement – seeking to live by the ideal of "give what you can, take what you need". At its heart lies the idea that each of us is uniquely valuable and that social relations should enable each person to flourish according to their unique qualities and abilities. At its heart are the moral value of compassion and solidarity.

The key ideas are that social relations should be:

- non-coercive/consenting
- mutually empowering
- conscious

The main criticisms usually suggest that people just aren't like that! That in fact we are selfish, naturally competing with each other based on self-interest. Sure, we might cooperate (the criticisms run) but only when it is our own self-interest. Therefore, we need laws and social structures that prevent society from deteriorating into rabble driven chaos. But the anarchist tradition suggests that we can grow beyond self-centred interest. It upholds a view of humanity in which it is also natural to grow into beings who care, and who can regard each other with kindness and compassion, or at very least recognise a basic common ground of solidarity with each other. It suggests that each of us really can become the kind of people who can honour the core value of Going for the Good of the Whole – mutually supporting each other to flourish and realise our potential – who can learn to live in free association.

Individual Ideal: Mature Interconnected Individual

The ideal in terms of the individual is the mature interconnected individual. It is a vision of the human person that builds on the modern idea of the individual, but that augments this idea both in terms of psychological development and in philosophical terms that compliment and extend notions of personal agency. The interconnected individual doesn't lose a sense of their unique qualities and characteristics, but recognises that these are not merely personal qualities but qualities that arise out of psychological processes, social conditions and the great ecological web of life and evolutionary history. Their sense of identity is more open and

provisional, just as their sense of agency affirms responsibility whilst foregoing self-aggrandising notions of self-determination.

The interconnected individual recognises, honours, and embodies connection on three levels:

- Psychologically: connected to themselves
- Socially: connected to others
- Ecologically: connected to nature.

Psychologically: They are deeply connected to themselves through self-awareness. They are psychologically integrated, emotionally literate, and know the depths of mind and heart.

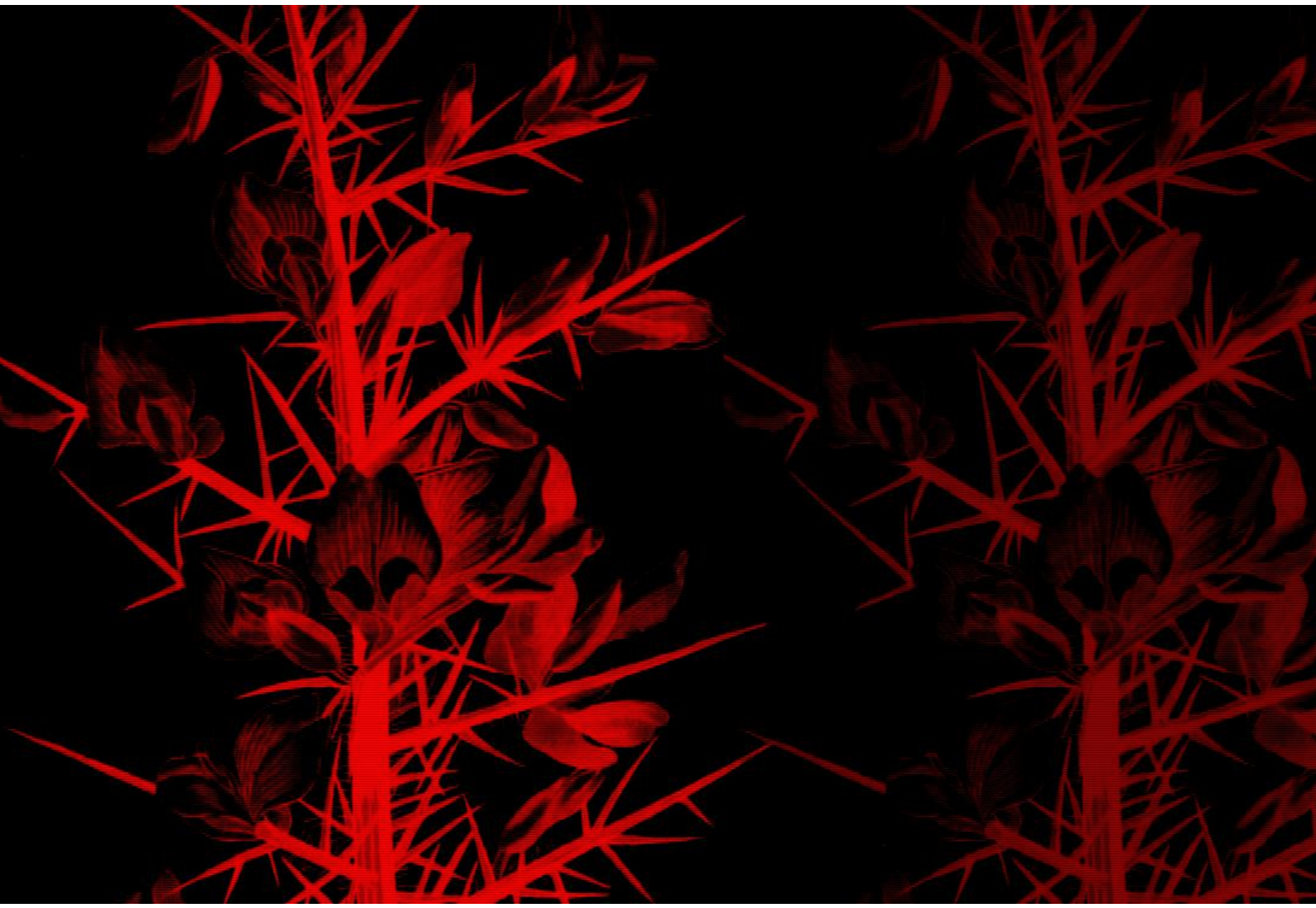
Socially: The inter-connected individual acknowledges all that has gone before – how they have grown out of social and historical processes, learning, nurture and culture. They will often feel gratitude towards ancestors, carers, and teachers. They will easily sense how their living is tied up with the living and work of so many others. They know that so much of what they consider their self is the fruition of the efforts of innumerable others in the contemporary world and of innumerable generations before. The interconnected individual recognises, as John Gray puts it:

> *Human individuals are not natural data, such as pebbles or apples, but are artefacts of social life, cultural and historical achievements: they are, in short, exfoliations of the common life itself.* (*John Gray, Gray's Anatomy p325*)

Ecologically: They are connected to nature both spatially and temporally. Spatially, they recognise their dependence on the intricate web of life of the ecosystem. They know how geosphere, atmosphere and biosphere form the complex web of life within which they are woven. And temporally, they know that their immediate and concrete experience arises out of a deep evolutionary process. They are alive to the way our moment to moment experience rides the crest of a wave that swells out of primordial time. Integral to their identity is a sense of the journey out from the primal flaring forth 13.7 Billion years ago, through the formation of the Earth 4.5 Billion years ago, and the shaping of the last 6 to 8 Million years of Hominid evolution.

Freedom

The psychologically integrated and self-aware nature of the inter-connected individual is a crucial condition for free association. Whilst we can understand free association socially to imply non-coercion, at the individual level it implies a quality of consciousness that is responsive and able to escape being unconsciously driven by habit. Unless we have sufficient self-awareness to avoid reactivity and to become mindfully aware of our tendencies, we cannot really empower ourselves to make choices. Driven by unconscious tendencies the ideal of free association falls short. It only becomes possible through both the restructuring of **social relations** and a **transformation of consciousness** whereby we are able to bring forth a non-grasping quality of awareness that supports a bright and responsive consciousness. And that transformation of consciousness requires both individual effort and social structures that support it.



Obstacles

So I've suggested an ideal at both the collective and individual levels, that is the free association of mature and Interconnected Individuals. It is something to work towards, a vision of who we are and what we can become. But before we get carried away with the ideal, let's explore some of the things that hold us back! Again we'll look at this from two perspectives: at the collective level and the level of the individual.

The Group

In terms of the collective dimension the major obstacle is what I will call The Group. Obviously "the group" is a neutral term. Here I am using it in a pejorative sense, with a negative connotation.

The characteristics of the group, in this pejorative sense are:

- Othering – a dynamic of identity formation that requiring an 'us' and a 'them'
- That it demands conformity
- That it feeds on insecurity
- And for which the primary aim is self-perpetuation.

Othering can best be understood as the tendency to construct identity and define belonging in terms of **Us** and **Them**. We can see this tendency especially clearly in times of insecurity. An obvious example is found in the prevalence of xenophobia and intolerance that expresses itself in response to economic precarity and the loss of social confidence. This tendency is expressed explicitly in populist far right tendencies incubated under the current conditions of economic and social precarity that have arisen in the wake of neoliberal *laissez-faire* globalisation. It is generally an expression of weakened cultural identity and socio-economic insecurity, both experienced as a threat to perceived needs. That sense of threat and instability seeks to resolve itself through the simplistic characterisation of an 'other' as the cause of the dis-ease.

Material insecurity combines with existential insecurity in leading us to construct an "other" in order to both consolidate our sense of who we are by defining what we are not, and offering a simple target for our wish to find something or someone to blame. As James Martin puts it,

> "*social groups and relations exist only by means of their symbolic differentiation from other possible relations and identities, through exclusion from or opposition to certain conditions. This antagonistic differentiation supplies a fictive coherence and objectivity to social identity through the demarcation of a threatening 'other' often regarded as irrational, hostile or beyond reasonable comprehension (selfish capitalists, envious foreigners, cold-hearted bureaucracies, and so on), thus promising an illusion of fullness of identity once the antagonist has been overcome.*"

Given that all identity can only ever be provisional, an underlying existential insecurity ramps up the tendency to create stereotyped and reductive conceptions of other. Growing Islamophobia is a good example. As is the increasingly strident expression of bigotry in political posturing of Donald Trump or UKIP.

Of course, these tendencies also functions more subtly. Often in progressive circles we still create our bogeyman in various ways. We fall foul of this in much of our attachment to political ideology and it plays out in more nuanced ways in dynamics of many groups. It is always important to watch out for the ways these tendencies play out in our own groups. Who is your caricatured 'other' to your 'us'?

The 'group' demands or encourages conformity. Fragile identities find it difficult to bear difference or tolerate diversity. Othering within the group itself is often an integral part of the group life. Looking for scapegoats, creating fear of exclusion, or the use of the fear of expulsion and rejection, creates pressures that encourage conformity.

This happens in quite subtle ways that almost all of us are involved in from time to time, often quite unconsciously. I have been very inspired by the work of an organisation in the United States called Training for Change. They run trainings for activists

which focus on what they call Anti-Oppression work. One of the models they use is called **Mainstreams and Margins**.

What they point out is that in all groups there are mainstreams and margins. Each group will have a set of cultural norms, prevalent ways of doing things that are subtly reinforced through mechanisms of approval. There are often preferred and acceptable modes of communication (not to get too emotional or not to interrupt others speaking are often recognisable norms). Unspoken hierarchies are strengthened and dissenting voices can be subtly portrayed as expressions of personal dysfunctionality. The mainstream of each group will create margins, people who feel less at home, who feel (and are often made to feel) that they belong less than others.

If we want to explore this in our own groups we should ask ourselves questions like:

- What is not welcomed here?
- What ways of communication are more acceptable? Which not?
- What is not being said?

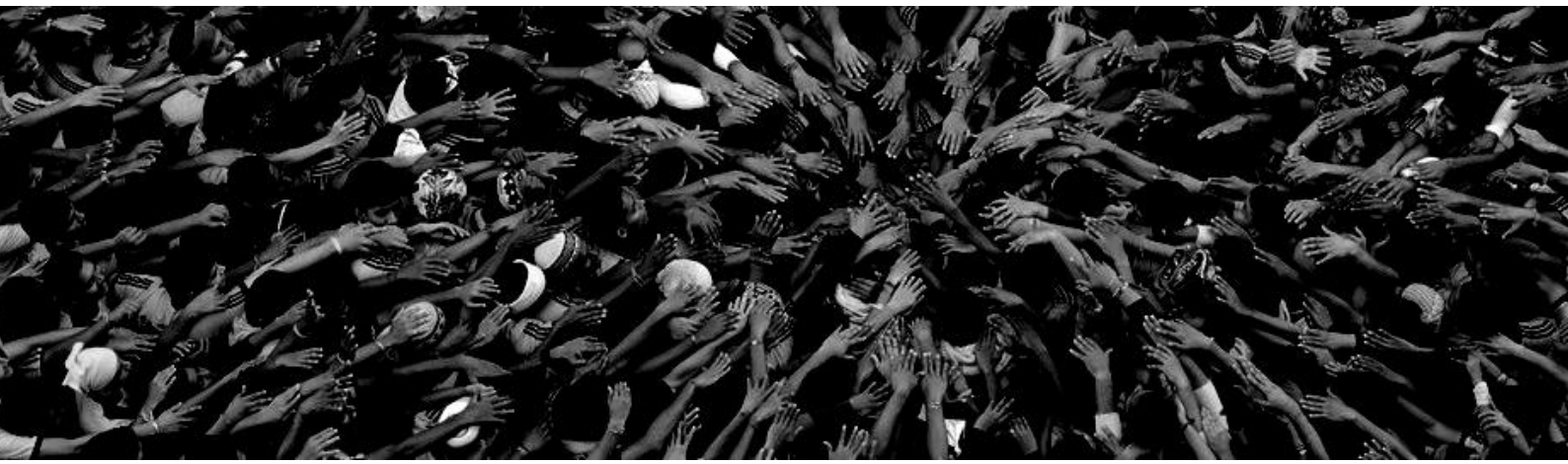
Even in very progressive groups we find this dynamic at play. And it is very important to keep asking ourselves:

- Who do we other? Who is the "them" to our "us"?
- How at ease are we, really, with diversity and divergence of opinion?
- What sub-cultural forms are we attached to?
- How do we marginalise others?
- How able are we to work with dissent?

It is so common to construct our identities in terms of who we are not. And this can be done very subtly. Who's not Green enough? Who's not radical enough? Who's not vegan? Who is vegan? To the extent that we do this unconsciously the shadow of intolerance is never very far away. Unless we become conscious of these subtle tendencies the seeds of fascism lurk in our own hearts – in our own groups and organisations. These are important things to reflect on. It is important to recognise the small things we do to gesture our belonging in a group, which in the process leads to the experience of marginalisation for others.

As long as our own sense of identity is insecure we will be prone to this kind of tendency. But identity is always going to be, to some degree, partial and provisional. The final resolution of these tendencies requires that we learn to become more comfortable with some of the existential lack that seems to characterise human life. The constitution of a healthy, affirmed and affirming sense of self can certainly help. And if we can put that in place it becomes valuable to deepen our capacity to turn towards the fundamental uncertainties of life.

For the 'group' the primary aim is self-perpetuation. In a way this is obvious and, in evolutionary terms, understandable. We see these characteristics in the historical formation of the tribe or clan, which were important steps towards more complex forms of social organisation. And we see it reasserted again as one of the core values of nationalism. But whilst these drivers of social cohesion may have played an important role in the survival and historical development of certain social formations, at this time it is possible to go beyond them. Unfortunately even in progressive political organising we see this primal orientation reproduced. Time and again we see the same drive shaping the behaviours of political organisations across the political spectrum. Although they start out with a strong social vision, perhaps deeply inspired by the possibility of changing society in the direction of pluralism and celebration of diversity, they gradually deteriorate into organisations whose own self perpetuation becomes more important than realising their espoused values. All too often, despite their growing irrelevance, the perpetuation of the party or political sub-culture itself becomes more important than the impact it is having.



Individual dimension: The Atomised Individualist

The historical emergence of the individual (a person who has a sense of their uniqueness, personal responsibility, choice and agency) has been an empowering construct. But in its ubiquity, this experience of individuality often delineates the horizon of the thinkable. This liberating and all too modern sense of self has become, under the influence of neoliberalism, more often than not, a trap. A sense of separateness and behaviour that assumes ones own centrality in the world can lead to narcissistic preoccupation and a compounding of an exclusively self-interested behaviour. The atomised individualist, as an obstacle to the ideal of the free association of interconnected individuals has the following characteristics:

- The characteristics of a 'group of one'
- Relating to others on the basis of competitiveness
- Attempting to establish control and command types of social relationships (and with that, hierarchical structures)
- Narcissism
- Hedonistic behaviours
- And a tendency to exacerbate alienated economic relationships.

As a 'group of one', the atomised individualist exhibits all of the tendencies of the Group! Namely, othering, psychological conformity and existential insecurity. The othering tendency is not based on a healthy sense of self, but a weak self-formation seeks to compensate for existential lack through a strongly constructing a separate view of self that is in denial of interdependence and casts others in a fundamentally antagonistic relationship to that vulnerable self. Conformity manifests within the internal structuring of the psyche. Those aspects of self that do not correspond to the limited view of self are repressed and denied. Aspects of the self (especially those parts which correspond to the characteristics in others which the self-views antagonistically) fall into the psyche's shadow or are subjected to harsh self-criticism and judgementalism. And, of course, these aspects of self that we are unable to acknowledge become projected out onto the 'other'.

This narrow and fragile self-formation is unable to stay open to its own partial and provisional nature, perpetuating a deep insecurity in relationship to the haunting sense of threat. The greater reality that fundamentally will never conform to the self's narrow desires or limited understanding, forever stalks the atomised individual – who will often develop more and more desperate strategies to avoid acknowledging its own fragility.

Competitive

The individualist is always in competition with others. Although they will cooperate, this is always with consideration of their own advantage.

This has become one of the dominant views of human nature (all of nature perhaps) under the mind-set of liberal humanism and, especially, capitalism. This view, that we are fundamentally and irredeemably driven by self-interest, has found it's fullest and most damaging expression in the belief system of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism goes so far as to model the entire global economic system around this view. When society is organised like that it is no wonder that we do become more competitive and individualistic!

Of course it doesn't work! One of the clearest indicators of how maximising self-interest fails to serve social wellbeing was the financial crash of 2008. It was such a stark example it shocked even the diehard ideologists.

At a House Committee session in Washington on the 23rd of October 2008, exploring the financial crash, the chairman asked Alan Greenspan former chair of the Federal Reserve and champion of deregulation: *'You found that your view of the world, your ideology, was not right – it was not working?'*

Greenspan replied: *'Absolutely, precisely. You know, that's precisely the reason I was shocked, because I have been going on for forty years or more with very considerable evidence that it was working exceptionally well.'*

Greenspan had found *'a flaw in the model that I perceived as the critical functioning structure of how the world worked'*. He went on: *'Those of us*

who have looked at the self-interest of lending institutions to protect shareholders' equity, myself especially, are in a state of shocked disbelief ... I made a mistake in presuming that the self-interest of banks and others was such that they were best capable of protecting their own shareholders'.

This is a fascinating example of the dysfunctionality of the system we live in. Why did it take the crash for Greenspan to see this? I mean, you could have told him that, right?

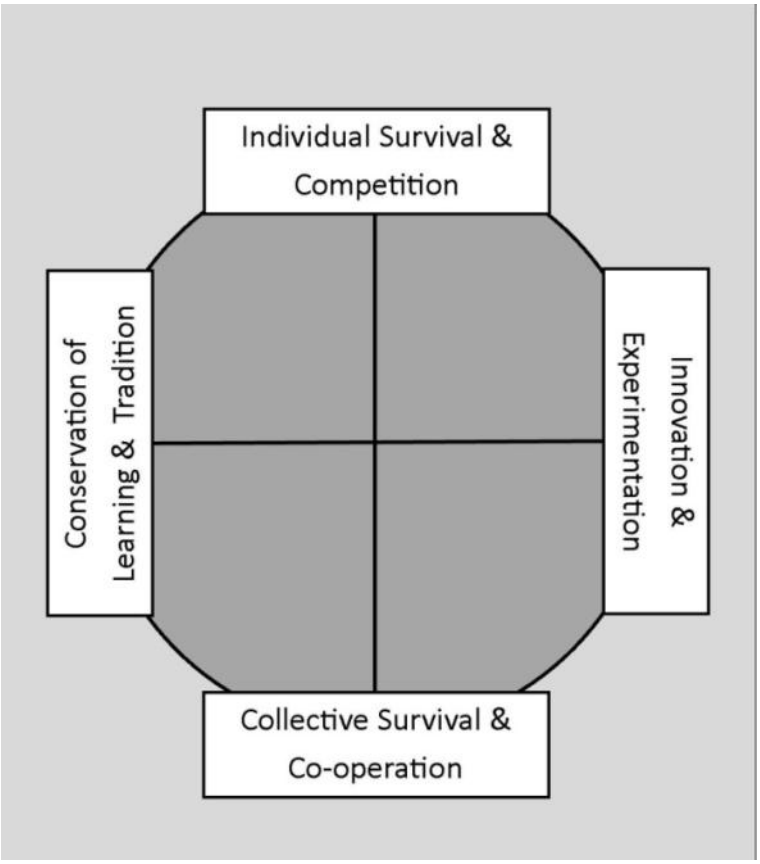
Self-interested individualism tends to assert itself through social relationships of domination. These often translate socially into structures along the lines of control and command style hierarchies. These are sometimes explicit social forms, but such relationships pervade our lives in informal and obfuscating ways.

The atomised individualist is a hyper-charged version of the individual. Excessive self-preoccupation and anxiety about personal status, image, or significance in the world often take narcissistic forms. Levels of self-obsession are perhaps more pronounced now than at any point in human history. And the constant projecting of who we are and what we've done through social media can often perpetuate this need to be seen.

It is easy to understand how an atomised view of the self plays into hedonism. When one's own subjective experience takes centre stage, the prioritisation of personal pleasure easily trumps other motivations. Likewise the ways self-oriented living heighten alienating economic relationships focused on aggregation and accumulation of personal economic stability and security – even at the expense of that of others. I am not going to unpack these further here, as I think they are probably very obvious to us in our experience.

Not "bad", just limiting

Although I have framed the group and the individualist in a way that emphasises their negative traits, it is important not to fall into the trap of casting these tendencies as simply 'bad'. These formations of human life serve a purpose. They are survival strategies that have played an important role in our evolutionary history. In his excellent book, *Prosperity Without Growth*, the economist Tim Jackson presents a diagram:



There are two axes. On one axis we find the two poles of Individual Survival & Competition set against Collective Survival & Cooperation. He points out that both of these tendencies have been necessary in the evolutionary history of humanity. He points out that there is something of a tension in the human heart – a tension that we also witness within most human institutions, organisations and groups. It is a tension between individualism and collectivism, autonomy and cooperation.

These two tendencies have been in tension for a long time. Often that tension is experienced as a conflict. The group demanding conformity from the individual, the individual being stifled, trying to escape from the group, or turn the group towards their own individual interests! How that tension is resolved depends on the kind of society we live in.

Jackson points out that:

> *"each society strikes the balance between altruism and selfishness (and also between novelty and tradition) in different places. And where this balance is struck depends crucially on social structure. When technologies, infrastructures, institutions and social norms reward self-enhancement and novelty, then selfish sensation-seeking behaviours prevail over more considered, altruistic ones. Where social structures favour altruism and tradition, self-transcending behaviours are rewarded and selfish behaviour may even be penalized."*

Both of these tendencies have been necessary. They are necessary in evolutionary terms – and we might also say that they are also necessary in terms of psychological development. In this evolutionary framing we can see that neither is in itself bad or evil. It is just that now we have the possibility of growing beyond them! Which is precisely what the ideal of the free association of interconnected individuals suggests.

The value base is the key

The key distinction between the obstacles and ideals are the value base they express. For the Group and The Atomised Individualist, the value base is self-interest. In the first case it is collective self-interest and in the second case it is personal self-interest. In the case of Free Association and the Interconnected Individual the value base is 'Going for the Good of the Whole'.

It is important to note that **the distinction between the ideals and the obstacles is not about resolving the tension between the individual and the group towards collectivism**. The systems based value of 'Going for the Good of the Whole' reframes the old tension between group and individual. 'Going for the Good of the Whole' does not imply the sacrifice of the individual for the sake of the collective. When we think in terms of systems we also learn to recognise that the integrity and health of the parts is integral to health of the whole. Systems thinking helps us to recognise the integrity of systems at varying levels – and gain a sense that at each system level the part is its own whole. 'Going for the Good of the Whole' includes the wellbeing and flourishing of the individuals – who are part of the whole!

The Transformative Group

Now we have a framework that includes an ideal, suggesting a direction to work towards, and a sense of the obstacles that stand in the way. We might also notice that the description of the obstacles is also a description of many of the tendencies that, perhaps in more subtle ways, we and our groups exhibit. We might say that the obstacles describe the starting point. Now let's begin to explore the terrain between the obstacle and the ideals, the working ground of the Transformative Group. What does moving from here to there look like?

We use the term **The Transformative Group** to describe the collaborative association of people who, through their work together, are seeking to transform both society and individual consciousness. So, what does that look like?

Well, firstly let's just be absolutely clear: it is not the ideal. In our transformative groups we carry in many of the tendencies associated with the group and the individualist. It is important to acknowledge that the obstacles are conditioned in us and our relationships to some extent – and that it will take conscious and committed effort to grow beyond them. In this sense the transformative group is the context for the emergence of the ideal.

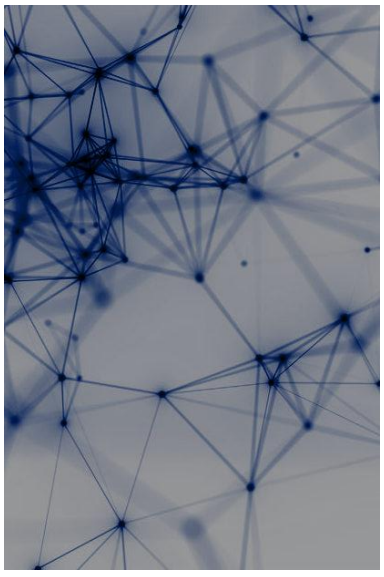
We will often fall short of the ideal. The process will often be messy. It is an enormous help to be prepared for this. This will help us to cultivate the wisdom to work from the ground up, taking the raw material of who we are as the basis for growing into who we might become. We will need to balance conscientious efforts to grow with a significant amount of patience towards ourselves and each other! We will disappoint each other and ourselves,. We will let each other down. But amidst those challenges, if we can find that the transformative group is a space of on-going learning. Of course we haven't (yet) got it all worked out!

Even though it helps to anticipate that we often won't get it right, it is crucial to explore the conditions that will help us to keep learning and moving in the right direction.

The Health of a Transformative Group: Creative Tensions

Although there are many specific tools and practices that will help us to collaborate both transformatively and effectively (and we will come on to those later), having a framework that can help us to understand why and how they work can be very useful. A helpful framework is to bear in mind some of the key tensions that arise in the life of our groups and organisations. There are many of these, but some of the most important ones are the tension and balance between:

Autonomy – cooperation
Innovation – conservation
Inclusion – exclusion
Diversity – commonality



Optimising and maximising

Working creatively with these tensions requires that we make a shift from thinking in terms of maximising to thinking in terms of optimising. Maximising is when we think that if something is good and useful, that more of it will always be good too! When a value is beneficial we might try to maximise that value or thing. But this is not how healthy systems tend to work. Think about plant nutrients. Because nitrogen is beneficial to plant growth we might mistakenly think that more of it will always be a good thing. But often in too high doses something that is a nutrient or a medicine becomes toxic or a poison. So instead of maximising we need to think in terms of optimising – getting the dose right – in the right balance.

Fugitive Equilibrium

It is also important to bear in mind that the right amount of something in the system is likely to keep changing. Kropotkin uses a beautiful phrase when talking about social systems. He talks about a "fugitive equilibrium". The fugitive equilibrium suggests that the perfect balance will always elude us! So we need to be able to continuously adjust and adapt appropriately. We can think in terms of working with these balances as involving a fugitive equilibrium. Things are rarely settled. Situations, organisations and individuals are always evolving. Because of this our ways of organising need to be responsive – that is, we need both a responsive quality of mind and responsive structures and practices. Generating the capacity for responsiveness and building this into our organisational structures is crucial. We can see this kind of understanding reflected in the recent development of 'agile organisations' and in the use of action learning methodologies.

Autonomy – cooperation

We have already seen the tension in this playing out in the obstacles. The shift in values from self-interest to "Going for the Good of the Whole" helps to turn this tension from stifling conflict into something creative and augmenting.

One of the key issues in our groups will be how we attend to the distribution of power. It is important to know when we need to include all of us in decision making and when we can distribute and delegate this throughout the group. A sense of involvement is important, but so is creating and allowing space for individual initiative. Often more horizontal forms of organising will preference distributing or sharing decision making. More hierarchical structures will tend to concentrate power. To keep the tension between autonomy and cooperation creative we need to become versatile in using a spectrum of decision making methods. We also need to attend carefully to the ways we support the flow of information and establish clear delegation and accountability. But, often more importantly, we need to attend to the qualitative nature of our relationships and ensure we dedicate time to building trust and effective communication between us.

Innovation – conservation

The health of a group or organisation requires both conservative and innovative dimensions and these will often be in tension. Innovators and conservatives are often at odds with each other. But both play an important role in the ecology of the organisation! Whether we are predisposed towards conservation or innovation it is important that we are able to appreciate the contribution both of these tendencies make. And it can be useful to be grateful for those who do what we are not inclined to!

We live in a society that maximises innovation. Innovation is important, but so is the preservation of learning and wisdom. The most effective agile organisations ensure that there is lots of responsive capacity, but also a stable structural basis to support that. It is important to establish clear and well understood processes and structures – and clear and understood methods for changing them in response to changing circumstances and new opportunities. But the rate of change is itself an important consideration.

One of the key factors here relates to rates of turnover in our groups. It can take time to build trust, knowledge of ways of working, and shared understanding. Although fresh energy and talent can be of real value there is also a lot to be said for continuity. While avoiding excessive rigidity, we need to take care that we don't throw everything up in the air continuously! Good induction methods are important – as the willingness when entering new groups to take time to get to understand why things are done certain ways before bringing all our valuable and new perspectives.

Inclusion – exclusion

A good way to think about this is to think about the structure of a living cell. The cell is a living system with a membrane that marks the boundary of the biological system and enables it metabolise effectively. The membrane needs the right degree of permeability. If it is not permeable enough it will not receive nutrients. If it is too open it will be flooded by toxins. Similarly a group requires a boundary, otherwise it is not a group at all, just a random amalgamation of elements. But just like the mem-

brane of a cell, we need to take care about the level of permeability of our group boundaries. How open or closed our groups are will depend on the purpose and approach we want to take – but wherever we strike this balance will have a very strong influence on the kind of organisation we are and the ways we can work.

Important factors that bear on this tension are issues such as vision and purpose, as well as shared values and practices. The issues surrounding this balance can pose deep challenges especially for grassroots organisations and groups. Inclusivity is a very important value in progressive social movements. Our society is beset by forms of exclusion and many important social battles have been fought in the name of greater inclusivity. Sadly, however, it is very common for progressive social movements and groups to become deeply dysfunctional when they simply maximise this value. Commonly we see lack of shared purpose or values leading to an inability to make effective decisions or to poor distribution of responsibilities. As with regards to the balance of innovation and conservation, excessive inclusivity leads to a serious loss of continuity. Similarly small organisations or groups quickly find themselves overstretched and unable to adequately resource themselves. Overstretching our resources and discontinuity are very common causes of burnout and group dissolution. There are often very difficult decisions to make in facing our limited capacity – and it is important to be strategic in ensuring we do not overstretch ourselves and fail to organise in ways that ensure we can gradually increase both capacity and our ability to make a real difference in pursuing our aims. The challenges we are taking on are big – it is important to give ourselves a chance so we and our groups can be around for the long haul.

In some forms of organisation inclusion and exclusion will be a simple matter of structure. In professional organisations people will often join through recruitment processes based on selection criteria and their role will be defined accordingly. In many grassroots political groups there are often more complex issues of belonging and identity at play. In these cases many of the challenges of 'the group' in terms of the construction of identity will be very important.

It is useful to think about the psychological maturation of individuals to lead towards a loosening around identity. As we constitute a more confident sense of self we can afford to hold onto it more lightly. Along with this will often come an ability to sit with difference and diversity more easily too. Perhaps with this in mind, it is common for people to complain when they see groups constituting strong and exclusive identities around gender, race, ethnicity or class. But the construction of these forms of collective identity can be very important. For people whose identity has been marginalised and subjected to prejudice, oppression, and negative mainstream representations, it is vital to reconstitute positive and empowering identities. This is often missed by those who have been fortunate enough to have grown up having their own identities affirmed or who have gained access to social privileges as a result of their identity.

Psychological theory, as well as theorists of radical democratic theory like Chantal Mouffe, suggests the importance of recognising the 'relational and unstable character of all social identities' (James). But in order to do this a healthy sense of self provides a useful foundation. The construction of such an identity needs to precede a deconstructive approach. So, whilst certain forms of identification can become imprisoning it is also necessary to recognise that identity formation can also be empowering. And before we can develop liberating identities we need empowering identities. With this in mind it is useful to to distinguish between identities that are:

> It's useful to distinguish between identities that are imprisoning, empowering, and liberating.

- **Imprisoning**
- **Empowering**
- **Liberating**

We might say that at its worst, the Group/ Individualist is stuck in imprisoning identity. The ideal of the free association of interconnected individuals is suggestive of liberating identity. Often the transition between these requires empowering identities. The trick is to ensure empowering identities don't fall back into imprisoning ones.

Constituting empowering identities, both personal and collective, plays a crucial role in framing the tensions between inclusion and exclusion in our groups. In that process we need to beware the excesses of 'othering' tendencies as we construct the

'us and them'. Attending to the ways we work with diversity and apply anti-oppression approaches in our work can help to keep this healthy.

Diversity – commonality

Healthy and resilient systems – ecological or social – require diversity. But diversity needs to be supported by a sense of commonality – especially in terms of purpose and shared needs. The dilemmas that face liberal notions of tolerance are an interesting case study. Whilst tolerance of diversity becomes a core value it becomes clear that a degree of commonality is required to uphold this value. As Chantal Mouffe suggests, a basic level of shared politico-ethical understanding becomes an instrumental necessity if we want to uphold values of pluralism and diversity in society. Similarly in our groups, certain shared practices and commitments are required to enable us to hold diversity well. And we need to be able to affirm common purpose and mutual respect for our basic humanity as a foundation for honouring our differences. While it is crucial to value diversity, we need to consistently affirm our commonality.

As discussed earlier, awareness around the dynamics of mainstreams and margins are important here, as are methods of discussion and dialogue that can actively embrace dissent and minority voices.

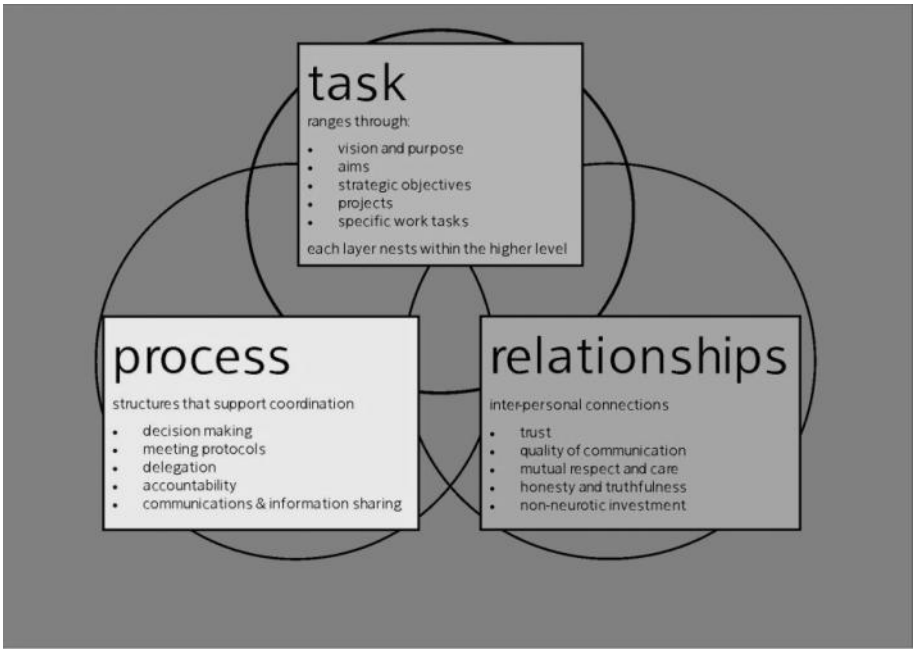
Conditions & Practices

If these balances and tensions are always subject to a fugitive equilibrium how can we and our groups stay alive to them and remain adequately responsive? What conditions can help?

Task-Process-Relationship

One thing that can help is to ensure that we attend to each of the three spheres Task, Process, and Relationships.

Task is often the basis for our coming together. It ranges from vision down various layers to the specific actions we need to take day to day. But attending well to this sphere involves asking: How clear is our sense of purpose? Is our vision really shared? And how well do we develop the strategic pathways that can carry us from here to there? In most activist circles task is omnipresent in awareness, pressing on us at all times. How do we balance short term and long term objectives? Is the sustainability of ourselves and the organisation folded into our understanding of our task? And how well to we balance 'task time' with 'development time'?



Process is an area that also seems to get quite a lot of attention in social change work. Essentially it refers to the structures that support coordination – things like decision making, meeting protocols, methods of communication, etc. Often people are conscious of how process has a strong bearing on how well we empower each other, on whether we embody core values such as inclusivity and respect

for diversity. At times however, especially for the process-geeks among us, process can become an end in itself. It is also important to beware fetishizing certain types of process and become versatile in applying processes and structures that are appropriate to the task as hand.

Relationships is the sphere that often gets most neglected (although this can be very culturally specific). Often, no matter how good our process is, or how clear we are about what we are trying to do, unless we attend to the quality of relationships in our groups our efforts will be undermined again and again. Sadly we can feel there is insufficient time to attend to this dimension outside of the very instrumental nature of our working relationships. But by taking more care of this sphere we can create conditions that really allow our work to flow. How well do we take each other into account? How conscious are we of the needs people have? How attentive are we of the impact our ways of communicating have on each other? In attending to this qualitative dimension we can begin to really embody some of the life-affirming values we struggle for in the world.

Supportive Conditions

Purpose that is bigger than the group: Core values are often the factor that most influence the shape of a system. Sharing a sphere of concern that is greater than the group itself creates a helpful tension. In activist and political organising, keeping this in sight is an important touchstone.

Shared commitment to transform and to honour the developmental potential of ourselves and others: Given that the potential of collaboration is something most of us need to grow into, it is vital to really value our potential and the potential of others. The willingness to grow and learn, and to support each other to do so, is basic. We need to consistently place our failings in the light of development. And commit to helping each other mature and gradually overcome our limiting conditioning.

Valuing the wellbeing of individuals as integral to the wellbeing of the whole: Often we exert pressure on each other (and ourselves) to overstretch. Burnout is the cause of enormous damage in our groups. It leads to entrenched conflict, the inability to fulfil responsibilities, and too much responsibility

falling back on too few people. Unless we take care of each other we lose important talent and experience from our groups.

Valuing collaboration as a necessary developmental context: Given that challenges and difficulties are inevitably going to arise, it is important that we value the transformative opportunities that collaboration offers – both the challenge and the support it offers.

Shared or at least mutually respected practices for self-awareness and transformation: Self-awareness is one of the most important ingredients. But it doesn't arise all by itself. Often this holds us back. We need specific and effective practices. These might be meditation, therapeutic processes, giving and receiving feedback, or taking the important time to reflect and explore our experience. Mutual respect for the practices we use are important because that helps to give us confidence that each of us is growing and able to own our side of difficulties. We will need to forgive each other again and again, but also know that each of us is making practical efforts to overcome our limitations. Such practices are necessary in developing the responsive awareness needed to work with a fugitive equilibrium!

Tools for organisational/group reflection: In addition to self-awareness we need ways of reflecting collectively and on a group level. Identifying and naming dynamics within the groups is a necessary part of collective learning. Just as our own capacity for responsive awareness is important, we need tools that contribute to good feedback, information flow and responsiveness at an organisational level.

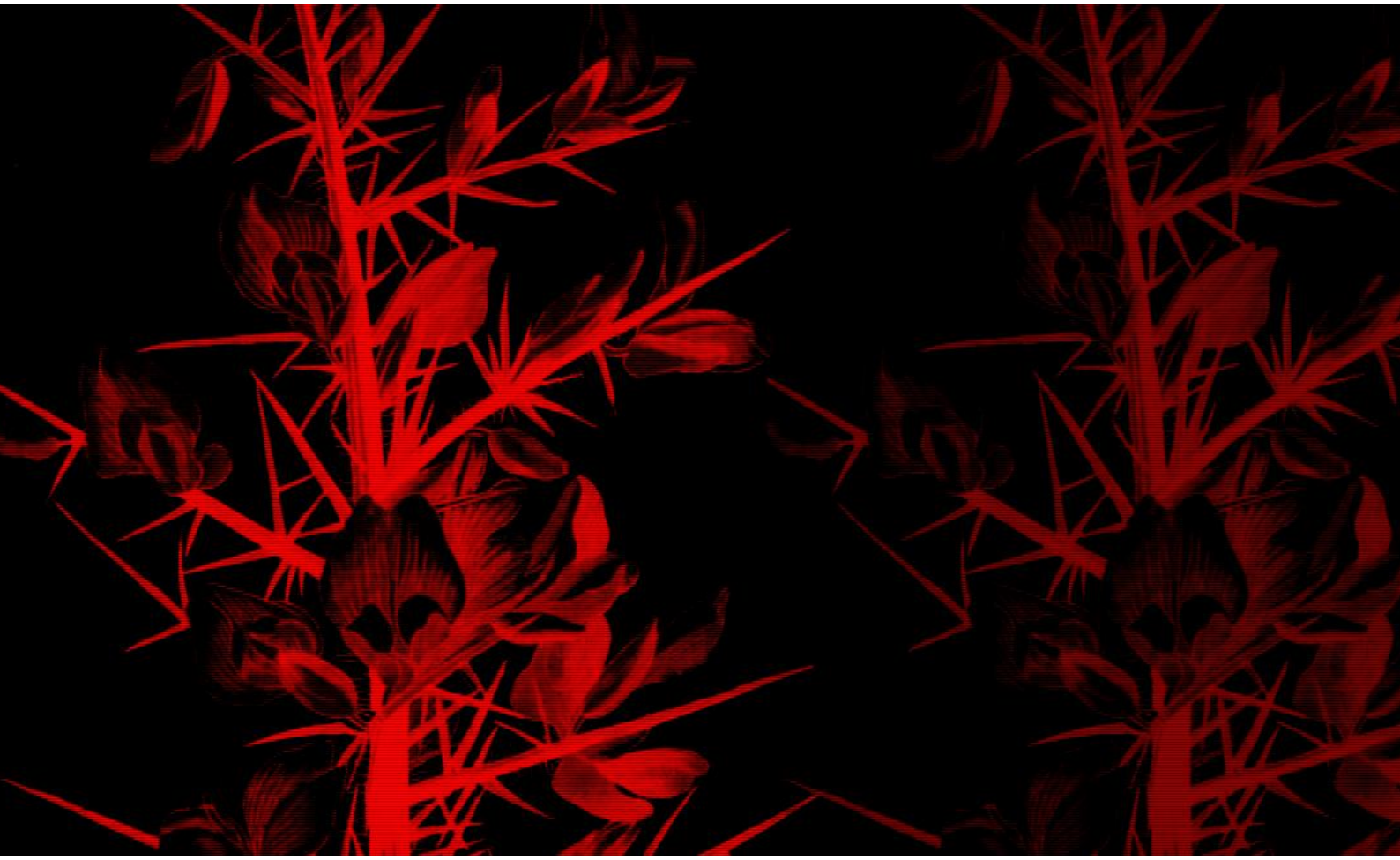
Balancing action and reflection: There is always going to be lots to do. But we need to take time to stop, pause, reflect and learn. Without this we keep reproducing the old problems. Learn we need both reflection and action, reflecting, testing our learning and then learning again!

Clearly articulated ethical principles and practices: Shared commitment to ethical principles is important. It underpins the building of trust and helps us to hold each other to account. These should be principles we want to embody, rather than rules we are required to obey.

Long-term association: Often this is going to be a tough one. In a world with so many choices and the possibility of mobility, it is becoming less common that people can make long-term commitments to projects or each other. But deeper connection and trust take time to build. When longevity of connection and working relationship is possible it is important to value what that can enable.

External support and perspectives: All groups and organisations can benefit from fresh perspectives and external support. At times of conflict or big strategic decisions it can be useful to be able hear views from people you trust who are not in the organisation. Establishing these kind of organisational and personal mentors creates a valuable resource.

Being open to dissolution and renewal: Sometimes things are not fixable. Sometimes a group outlives its value. Don't try to preserve the group at all costs. Sometimes more creativity comes from division and new combinations. It is important to know when to call it a day.



With these conditions in mind, the trainings support people to gain a deeper understanding of:

Group Formation - Creating a culture that reflects our values and supports effective collaboration

Vision and Purpose - Setting intentions and orienting our action around what really matters to us and the world we live in

Action Learning - Staying responsive and relevant in an ever changing world

Groups and Systems - Using key systems based concepts in designing our organisations and groups

Understanding Participatory Process - Drawing in the wisdom of the group and ensuring the whole remains greater than the sum of the parts

Working with Power - Transforming it when it becomes dysfunctionally entrenched, distributing it effectively and using it responsibly

Decision Making - Applying appropriate methods in ways that support accountability, creativity and initiative

Patterns that Support Important Conversations - Recognising key elements that enable dialogue, sharing and bring the best out from each other

Transformative Groups - Exploring how we make our work together a context for individual growth and development

Strategic Thinking - Going from vision to pathways of effective action

Team Dynamics - Harnessing diversity, playing to strengths, and helping each other to bring our best

Awareness and Emotional Intelligence - Experiencing how attention training, mindfulness and emotional intelligence can contribute to effective collaboration.

In each of these areas there are numerous tools that can be learnt and applied. Often we need to carry these back into our organisations and begin to practice them and gain competence and experience. If we do, we will find over time that we are more able to remain responsive to the fugitive equilibrium of tensions and conditions that we collaborate within and become more able to work with those skilfully. As we do we will see more and more the effectiveness, transformational, and creative potential that collaboration can manifest.