

---

# DANCING THE MEASURES OF TRANSFORMATION

---

*Heather Wood Ion*

Peter Drucker said that 95 percent of what matters in an organization cannot be counted. J. K. Galbraith said, “If it is not counted, it tends not to be noticed.” Demming estimated that 95 percent of the time within an organization is spent on measuring or counting something. The implications of these facts are obvious. In addition, Drucker (1994) said that no time in recorded history has seen such a radical social transformation as our own. Many of us share a purpose of supporting social and personal transformations, in part because of the additional sense of meaning such activity brings to us, and in part because we all share a sense of frustration that the disconnections of our world are too frequently increased rather than improved by conventional efforts to ameliorate them.

As we attempt something new in the world of philanthropy, we must ask several questions:

- What really matters to people struggling to transform their lives?
- How do we know that it matters?
- How do we know what works as the transformation occurs?
- Can we replicate success?
- Can we, or should we, count what counts?
- Can we create a space in which to connect others to these reflections?

Just as a reminder: more than two billion people in the world live without electricity; four billion rarely make a phone call; three billion have never seen a doctor; more than a billion are illiterate. The poorest people in our world live on a dollar or less per day, and the buying power of their income is decreasing (North and Swider, 2001). Now more than ever, Dr. Jonas Salk’s question, “Are we being good ancestors?” is a critical one for us to answer.

An earlier paper by this author (which bears the same title as this one) (Ion 1995) considered the measures used to assess the impact and value of prenatal care. That paper looked at the average number of insurance claims paid for

mothers' prenatal visits as related to birth weight and the costs of medical complications experienced, to derive an understanding of the standard of care commonly given women during pregnancy. Curiously, the study found that once the aggregate number of five visits was accepted, an understanding of the effectiveness of those five visits or the content of what took place at any visit was not pursued as part of the assessment of quality and has rarely been explored. What counts in pregnancy is the mother's health and a healthy baby, but what is typically measured is the cost and frequency of episodic encounters with a disease-care system.

### *Thinking in Terms of Transformations*

Interestingly, the most effective assistance for pregnant women in helping their children is maternal literacy—"teach the mother, reach the child"—which does not even appear on the radar screen of conventional health outcome measures. As a matter of course, the necessary and unwavering baseline for care is based on the worst indicators. Typically, indicators of quality are derived from aggregations of adverse experiences and negative outcomes, rather than from comparison with a desired or successful end result. Such episodic counts or aggregates provide transactional information, but neglect more transformative dimensions of the activity being examined. Pregnancy is a transformational experience and neither its process nor its outcomes can be understood by simply counting discrete transactions, such as visits to a health care provider. Hence, the question of "Can What Counts Be Counted?" is used here to provoke and evoke reflections about our philanthropic processes, how we manage and learn from those processes, and how we share what we learn. The question is not intended to contrast a true and a false approach or right and wrong ones.

Literacy is another transformation. Let's look at what is counted when we appraise literacy. At present, we evaluate our educational system by saying that the school dropout rate in this country is around 29 percent, an aggregate tally of how many students quit attending school. SAT scores, which measure only one kind of intelligence and performance, are likewise a transactional measure of our educational system, providing episodic information about student performance at one moment in time. Whether SAT scores go up or down is said to indicate improvement or decline in the educational work of our schools. Another such figure is that an estimated 90 million adults in this country cannot read a ballot in order to vote (Kirsch 1993). Similarly, it is estimated that 49 percent of the nation's high

school graduates—*not dropouts*—are functionally illiterate (meaning that they have difficulty with the basic reading and writing levels required to find employment or be trained for the working world). Such indicators may have their uses, but they do not provide sufficient insight into the transformational and long-lasting ends of education. An indicator or measure of what really counts about literacy which would not be merely transactional would be how many individuals are literate enough to perform the jobs available in their local economy. Processes, like patterns, are best understood not in terms of episodes or aggregates, but in terms of variances and diversity, which makes comparison possible.

Wise educators will say the following:

- What is taught is not what is learned.
- What is graded is not what is known.
- What is said is not what is heard.
- What is meant is not what is said.
- What is known is not what works.
- What works is hardly ever known.

Much of the confusion that results from using our traditional accounting measures when looking at philanthropic activities stems from the fact that these numbers measure volumes only. They do not measure effectiveness, which is the accuracy or utility of the particular tool or intervention, how well we did what we were doing. Nor do they measure efficacy, the ability to produce a desired effect, which is a measure of change, the difference the actions made to the recipient. Transactional accounting measures look at a point, not at a process, and transformation is an unpredictable and dynamic process, not a point. Furthermore, we cannot look at relationships as mere components of an aggregate. Measurement is an activity directly related to the premises of reduction, and the derivative professions of evaluation and assessment also presuppose reduction to a unit appropriate to the tool being used.<sup>1</sup> Measuring is not, in most organizations, disciplined by the question of how a particular measure informs us about necessary and sufficient strategies for improvement. For instance, microcredit exists to alleviate poverty, but the performance indicators used to look at the effectiveness of programs measure the profitability of the lending institution and the quality of its portfolio. Such financial measures do not inform us about whether the services are actually alleviating poverty (Cheston 1999).

Asking the right questions seems to be a lost art, and even in the field of evaluation few questions address the issue of what the organization is trying to achieve in consequence of what it is doing, or exactly what effect it is trying to cause through its activities. The movement of Appreciative Inquiry, started by David Cooperrider at Case Western Reserve University, initially was based on this premise of asking questions of appreciation and in all questions avoiding deficit discourse and volumetric measures. Several related movements for the use of asset-based language and positive discourse also generally avoid transactional measures in their reporting work.<sup>2</sup> This is not the way most such evaluations are done today. Most granting organizations request an evaluation strategy, which is usually taken to mean a cost/benefit description of the use of grant funds, not a strategy for fully understanding what has been achieved. Educational workshops, for example, distribute evaluation sheets to assess the presentation but tend not to look for successful application of the lessons learned; community action organizations report measures such as employment and enrollment, but not on how resources were used to change lives in a lasting way. One of the great tragedies of the “associative”, or what Kenneth Boulding calls the “integrative”, sector of our economy is that there is no communication network through which lessons learned can be captured or collaboration established as mutually beneficial.<sup>3</sup> Without such information, how can philanthropic organizations and donors know whether they are creating transformational change

### ***Characteristics of Transformation***

If you search for the word *transformation* on the Internet, you will find 13 million references ranging from lycanthropy to specific mathematical exercises.

Trying to narrow that down by starting with the word change becomes an enchanting exploration of language: Charles Handy lists *change* as being used as a noun universal, a noun particular, a noun metaphorical, a verb transitive, a verb intransitive, a verb metaphorical, and an adjective (Handy 1990, 7). Conventional measures and evaluations of change are generally based on old views of causality, however, and do not address the dynamism of the process, nor the relationships within that process. Further, conventional measures include very little effort to juxtapose the reality of experience with the intent of the agent of change.

Some characteristics of transformation seem so basic as to be trivial, but in the contemporary atmosphere pervaded by self-help gurus and related

movements, it is important to remember that these characteristics indicate a profound altering of perspective, of ways of thinking and acting, and of evaluation or reflection. Transformation cannot be purchased, nor can it be undertaken as if change were simply a commodity to be added to our other acquisitions.

Transformation is *irreversible*—a frog cannot return to being a tadpole, and a person cannot return to being illiterate after learning to read (except after a brain injury). Women's empowerment movements illustrate this in terms both of the business skills learned and in the literacy of the women involved. Even if their economic status or opportunities change from the immediate context in which they learned their new skills, the women do not revert to their previous level of disempowerment, but instead seek new ways to apply the new skills.

Transformation is *dynamic*—the process is ongoing and creates energy. Teachers and motivational speakers know that once a student or group becomes excited about the process of learning itself, each newly learned skill builds on and feeds the next. Scientists perhaps best illustrate this phenomenon in the ways in which every experiment, whether failed or not, fuels the energy to keep learning and keep experimenting further. Entrepreneurs often illustrate this same dynamism of being transformed by each effort regardless of whether society judges and rewards that effort as successful.

Another intrinsic characteristic of transformation is that it is *unpredictable*—the full outcome of the process is unclear at a given point or for a specific individual. Healing as a transformative process illustrates this well, in that the new state of health following recovery or rehabilitation cannot be predicted by even the most rigorous methods. The recent, popular television series *The Biggest Loser* was based on this premise, for as the participants learned the skills of healthy living, exercise, and nutrition, neither the audience nor their trainers could predict the outcomes of their application of those skills. Similarly, once an adult becomes literate for the first time, it is unpredictable how that new condition will change their lives.

Transformation is most essentially different from transaction in that it is *pervasive*—the effects of change are not confined to one aspect of self or one activity. For example, when a group of employees began to describe their reality to a new CEO, not only did their perspectives on their work and performance change, but also their perspectives on their identity and their lives were altered. One participant said, "By having someone else's attention given to my reality, I attended to it also, and I now see that I do have choices and power about who

I am. I never felt before that I could stand outside a situation and look at it; I always felt I was just a minor part of a machine. My whole life looks different because of that question.”

Challenging to both expectations and patience is the fact that transformation is *discontinuous*—participants, and aspects of process, find their own rhythms, and the transformation may take place in fits and starts. A child does not learn to walk, or to speak, without falling or babbling, any more than Edison could create the light bulb in one smooth, continuous effort. In community development or disaster recovery, it is important that all the volunteers and workers appreciate this reality, for the periods in which progress is difficult to perceive are just as essential as the times of obvious achievement. A grassroots political campaign to save a public library was sustained over the eighteen months necessary not because of continuous achievement—actually, the failures added great definition to the cause—but because participants understood that the process was changing the entire community, perhaps especially in the quiet times of preparation.

Transformation, similarly, is *asymmetric*—imbalance and lack of homogeneity across participants or across aspects of the individual life involved affect our ability to induce change. Egalitarian prejudices often spur us to deny the reality of this characteristic, but we have all seen that leaders do emerge, and that the amount of our own energy we have to invest in ourselves is uneven. On being told that her vote was as important as anyone else’s, a woman in a village in India said, “How can that be? I know less, I have learned less than others. Maybe someday I could learn, but right now I do not know enough to be wise. I want someone who is wise to guide me.” Migration and immigration both illustrate the asymmetries of the ways in which transformation acts.

The aspect of transformation that is *generative*—where the process creates more of whatever it does and whom it involves—is the aspect on which much of the industry of charity is based. However, generativity in transformation is not a matter of marketing. Immigrants, for example, inspire others to move, and they inspire people of different social classes, economic opportunity, and social traditions. The homestead movement in the North American West well illustrates this generativity, for the pioneers did not claim that life in a sod hut in February was a fulfillment of dreams, but their efforts inspired others to try, and their redefinition of success and of neighborhood built nations.

Most of us readily recognize that transformation is empowering—participation changes an individual’s sense of authority. The newly literate

person or child, for example, feels able to explore the world. The newly employed immigrant feels confident that she is making her world better. It is this characteristic, however, which is frequently resisted and seen as dangerous. In a company in which silent compliance was the tradition, for example, the introduction of circles of excellence for employee input was feared by the employees and resisted by the owners as merely disruptive. In a negotiation to resolve a community conflict, holding an open town meeting was strongly resisted as “opening too many cans of worms,” but it was eventually viewed by the citizens as the singular event which showed them they could express their dreams and act upon them. Hence, the fear of empowerment is every bit as important when studying transformation as are the new sense of responsibility and power that follow acceptance of change. The Imagine Movement, based on Imagine Chicago, is an excellent example of how to counter this fear of and resistance to the dangers of change.

All of these aspects can have either negative or positive results—a transformation that could lead to empowerment could cause enslavement. Any calcification of these aspects that stops the process as a whole will tend to move the impact toward negative outcomes rather than positive ones.

What is clear is that transformation takes place over time, and that relevant benchmarks regard process, not goals. I suggest that when we deal with transformation, the word *measure* is most appropriately taken as meaning meter or poetical rhythm. Musical measures serve as a means to pass on the experience beyond an immediate community and beyond a shared moment. The musician will think in multiple times and in patterns of time, and the mathematician perceives multiple times and dimensions; for our purposes, the idea of a measure is used not as a reductive tool but instead in terms of time. From this perspective, transformation can be understood as the orchestration of related, but different, aspects of a performance.<sup>4</sup> Replication, therefore, is neither formulaic or dependent on discrete units, as it is customarily described as being.

### ***An Example of Transformation***

To illustrate this view of transformation, I suggest we look to WORTH, a Women’s Empowerment Program which was first tested in Nepal, as described by Marcia Odell, its program director, and Jeffrey Ashe of Oxfam USA.<sup>5</sup> WORTH is often characterized as being an example of microfinance. The project in Nepal has reached more than 100,000 women in more than six thousand saving and

lending groups in just four years. The women are helped to begin saving money, so that they are not building debt to a financing institution but instead creating equity for themselves in microenterprises. At the same time that they start saving, each woman is put in contact with a literacy volunteer in their community to help them learn to read and write. Then, using simple, self-instructional materials, they go on to master working with numbers and basic accounting. The entire program is delivered through an appreciative framework, with no external subsidies—women actually pay a small fee to join the program—and is designed to build both individual and group empowerment and autonomy. The small fee is the first evidence of investment in themselves that motivates the women to change their sense of self-worth. This model is in direct contrast to traditional approaches to philanthropy, which create dependence and are episodic in their focus on a specific “problem” and its solution. In this model, there is no presumption that some external expert or institution will “solve” the individuals’ problems or judge the local needs and initiatives.

When we look at WORTH as a model of transformation, what is most striking is that the participants manage to change their view of themselves within a highly unfavorable environment:

- a per capita income of \$210 per year, and only half that much in rural regions;
- a hierarchical, male-dominated society which places little value on women;
- endemic domestic violence against women; and
- female literacy rates as low as 14 percent.

The comments of the women on the consequences of saving and of their participation in the group primarily center on the importance of their increased self-confidence and autonomy, the chance to learn to read, and their learning of their own rights. Savings, credit, and business development are less important than these personal changes, even though the former are often the primary focus of attention in the program. Most exciting is that the women view themselves as having the ability to give—they realize that they have knowledge and a story to tell. They are *transformed* from being defined as “the poor” or “in need” or recipients, into givers or teachers of a successful model and generative experience.

When we ask our initial questions—What are we trying to do? And what are we in fact doing?—regarding WORTH, the answers are very clear, even though they are not shaped by measures of transactions. What is attempted in WORTH



is to give women the means and the literacy skills to achieve some level of economic self-reliance. The women participants themselves are now spreading WORTH village banking to other women in their communities by telling their own stories. Since the core USAID funding dried up, WORTH women have—on their own—created between eight hundred and two thousand new economic groups reaching fifteen thousand to forty thousand women. Since they are doing this on their own, no one knows accurately how far they have reached. Moreover, this has been happening in a context of profound civil struggle in Nepal. The groups are now generating revenues of approximately \$20 million per year.

### *Expanding a Transformation*

Now WORTH is rapidly expanding throughout Africa, having started in Kenya less than two years ago, and is achieving remarkable effectiveness in refugee camps. Sierra Leone, Guinea, Congo, and Mozambique are all applying the WORTH program to women's issues and to HIV/AIDS, to address the core issues of poverty and gender inequality. The Salvation Army and Project Concern International have both adopted the WORTH program and have signed agreements with the sponsoring agency, PACT, to take it into as many as 109 countries. The measures of success of this program do not conform to audits and accounting terms, particularly since women are spreading the program without sponsorship, external investment, or philanthropic outsiders. The answers to our two questions are clearly congruent: the intent to raise economic self-sufficiency through literacy and savings has been achieved, and the women and their families are empowered enough to become socially and politically active as a result.

The methods used throughout WORTH involve appreciation of the participants' abilities, and in consequence the participants appreciate the transformation of their own capacities. They say that they wish to share their discoveries of their own strengths and successes. Note that they do not want others to tell the story; they value their own voices. They dream of expanding these strengths and successes, and they know they can design ways to realize those dreams. It is particularly important here to remember that the transformation is attractive to others as well—the men of the WORTH villages want to have what the women have achieved, and they want to experience the expanded view of opportunity. However, the women do not attempt to engage the men in their groups. They can and do deliver actions and commitments to start the process and to monitor and report their progress to other women. In the

areas where WORTH has been operating for several years, the women experience these changes as scalable. They want to share the program with other women, and thus far on their own they have taken it to perhaps three thousand new groups in Nepal and sixty thousand women without any external support (Odell 2002).

The theoretical implications of the results of WORTH are, I believe, of particular importance to philanthropy. Primarily through the use of existing local groups based within local traditions, the movement identifies and respects the participants' autonomy and their positive strengths within the context relevant to them. External expertise and support are seen as *enabling*, not determining or ultimately responsible. This local accountability permits experimentation, ambiguity, and redirection so that compliance or conformity no longer means that an external or monitoring institution must be created or satisfied at the expense of local adaptation.

The purpose, as well as the conduct, of the organization is transparent to all at every level. Participants feel themselves to be co-creators of the effort—women who contribute a tiny amount of savings are co-creators, as are those who take out a loan to start a microenterprise, and those who carry the message to another group. Democracy based on dialogue requires a group small enough that conversations can occur; the WORTH groups on average have less than twenty-one members each. This means that lessons learned and mutually reinforcing connections are immediate and iterative. The narrative truths of transformative experiences can be shared with the patience and rhythms of storytelling and are thus likely to be absorbed and attended to more than the abstractions or analytic reports required by external institutions.

The inherent flexibility of the model means that unanticipated and ancillary impacts can quickly be included in local actions, not only because such small, local groups are below the radar of a regulatory framework but also because the lessons learned are part of the process of continuous improvement as women share their stories in an ongoing and expansive commitment. The initial empowerment of the women results from the introduction of a new concept, which facilitates new learning and risk-taking behaviors; thus the project changes the intellectual framework first. Through participation in the project, social relationships and social horizons expand and become inclusive as a result of experienced benefit, not as a requirement by an external agency.

Replication, or the expansion to new sites or new activities, takes place according to the readiness and willingness of local participants and their own

energies. There is no imposed restriction or pace that distorts the driving desires. This is the asymmetry of the process: no attempt is made to predict or to predetermine who leads the group beyond their initial achievements. The precipitating, transformative energy that moves the perception from a problem focus to positive action is the experience of direct benefit through a changed behavior. Savings of less than 50 cents per month have created an aggregate \$2 million in savings in less than three years and have created businesses with \$20 million in annual revenues in Nepal alone. Thus very small changes have resulted in sustainable and pervasive change with very large effects.

Autonomy, accountability, intimacy and reputation, adaptability, conceptual curiosity, inclusiveness, expansiveness and connectedness, patience, responsiveness and responsibility, transparency and constant feedback—many of these concepts are familiar in this context because they have been described by Jan Hauser and Mark Miller as part of trusted networks and trust-raising activities necessary to augmented social networks. We do not yet understand how cohesion is created within these social networks, but the concept of transformation and studies of resilience certainly lead us in that direction.

### ***Assessing Benefits of Transformation***

When we do social assessments in order to understand who will benefit from a project or intervention, we are not only creating some sort of baseline, but ideally we will be outlining the participants' conceptual maps and willingness for involvement. WORTH illustrates the value of building on existing local groups—part of this value comes from the fact that the local groups already share and invest in the common good. The current concerns with “sustainability,” by contrast, often ignore the point that existing local groups are more committed to the sustainability of their own worlds than are the external experts who believe they bring an answer to issues of sustainability. It is to be hoped that the ongoing efforts to help in the recovery from the Asian tsunami will respect this local knowledge.

WORTH has also shown that it is possible to avoid the sadly common situation in which external intervention replaces one elite with another. The program averts this by ensuring that the local group keeps its own accounts, monitors individual participation, and reports on its own activities to other groups of similar purpose. Trust, reputation, and the intimacy of proximate and

involved members are mutually reinforced. There is no expectation of homogeneity in WORTH in terms of results or individual investment.

The essential ambiguity and dynamics of transformation should caution us away from asserting benchmarks or fixed indicators, especially those that emphasize governance rather than participatory experience. Educators, for example, are moving toward using portfolios rather than abstractions of tests as evidence of engagement and of the learning process. For instance, when children create a personal history about their lives, there are requirements as to components but no requirements as to the style or content of each component. There is a shared language and symbolic system, but the style with which those are used is left to the child. Similarly with community transformation, there are characteristics that can be identified, but the interplay of those characteristics can neither be programmed nor judged as right or wrong. This is why I recommend that we think of measures in terms of music rather than numbers. There is in transformation a formal framework, but the details vary within that framework, just as harmonies and rhythms vary along a melodic line in music.

We saw that WORTH initiated its process by changing the women's conceptual framework of what is possible for them. Meaning may also be contained within the form. The collective imagination of social change may include a unity between action and significance because the actions are the sign that one has achieved the imagined goal. The actions themselves are the evidence of the change desired. The formal framework, or boundary conditions, may be the definition of the group, such as poor women who wish to learn how to save; or it may be the environmental limit, as in "clean up the Hudson River," but whatever it is, it serves to enhance the cohesiveness of the relationships. The form—for example, microsavings—is created by the specific savings per month by a specific individual. But what that means to her, how and why she does it, and who is impacted by her actions, will be particular to her, not predetermined by the form. Thus musical notation can be used by Beethoven or Paul McCartney—each will create music, neither in a way predetermined by the notation. An Indian raga can be performed by Ravi Shankar, sung in a village festival, or adapted by Sheila Chandra to modify a Gregorian chant—each will find meaning and melody in a different way, but each will be understandable by the others or by an audience.

Tom Munnecke, founder of GivingSpace, notes that many people experiencing transformation ask the following question: "What would happen if everyone else acted this way?" The difficulty with this question is the definition

of the concept “everyone else” within a given group. We as human beings exist in relationships, and we tend to see the world in terms of the relationships of “them and us.” Expanding the “us” to include everyone depends, of course, on how we perceive and identify our world.

For instance, for my parents us meant the small town where I was raised. The cities one hundred miles away, and even more the city three thousand miles away where I went as an undergraduate, were definitely not “us” but were instead viewed as strange, dangerous, and incomprehensible. The fact that I chose to leave made me a marginal person in their eyes; I was no longer of the tribe of “us,” despite my roots, and was potentially just as strange and dangerous as “them.” *Everyone* for my parents meant “everyone who shares the way we live and is therefore safely predictable.” *Transformation* for them took place within that community, and they did not hold much optimism that the bigger world would change. Similarly, a mathematician from a small southern town was recently (in 2000) appointed to the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. The neighbors comforted his family because clearly anyone of talent could get a job in town, but if you did not have talent you had to go as far away as New Jersey.

One of the unanticipated results of the WORTH program in Nepal has been the effect of the women’s empowerment on their own families, on the males within the family, and on the “fireside” or domestic decision-making. This is not a matter of the women wanting the men to join their group or emulate their actions; it is a consequence of the transformations experienced by the women, which change their perceptions and behavior and therefore their relationships with the rest of the community. I doubt the validity of including missionary zeal regarding “everyone else” as an intrinsic element of transformation.

The process by which we move from parochial perspectives or tribalism to inclusiveness remains a huge area of inquiry. Mary Douglas and Jane Jacobs have written about “purity and danger” and “systems of survival,” and they have explored at length how group relationships are affected by participants’ shared sense of fear. Isaiah Berlin has written about the two concepts of liberty: freedom “from” and freedom “for.” We often think that those who do not have freedoms “from” (who have real survival needs) cannot be generous. In addition, we are often constrained to thinking of ourselves as without freedoms “for” because of the “them versus us” fears of threat and loss. Furthermore, few of us ask ourselves, let alone our adolescent children, how we will recognize freedoms “for.” (I will return to this topic shortly to consider how it relates to generosity.)

### *Learning and Resilience in Transformation*

There are other unexplored aspects of transformation visible in the WORTH experience. One is the altered sense of self the participants acquire, and another is their changed imagination regarding what is possible for them as individuals. As an appreciative process begins, “dreaming” is one of the four first steps, and that is dreaming of what might be, of possibility, of creating something different. However, in light of the women’s experiences, their dreams change—the women move on from saving to investing to building, or from saving to literacy to public health initiatives.

In learning, what we learn changes what we want to learn. The empowered women break their own cycle of dependence, and through their increased pride, they acquire new visions for their own future. This process is dynamic, just as, for example, our concept of health and fitness changes as we become healthier and more energetic. Change and learning, in other words, depend upon the sharing of information, as Noah Samara, founder of WorldSpace Corporation, put it:

True change does not begin with declarations, legislation, and grand action. These are its effects. Great change occurs somewhat quietly, almost imperceptibly, but always first in the minds of people. . . . Information is the predicate to everything we know. It is ubiquitous. It is behind our DNA, the chair we sit on, and the building we are in. It is the wealth of nations; it explains the poverty of nations.

Yet herein lies the rub, for just as empowerment and dreaming threaten existing power structures and excite resistance at many levels, so too does information. We who value open and appreciative explorations often forget the alarm such explorations provoke. In an experience of transformation, whether individual or social, at some point the transformed person or group becomes less attached to existing structures. Thus the newly empowered recovering alcoholic is a threat to the codependent habits within the family, just as a group of energetic village women starting their own businesses threaten the men on whom they have previously depended. Our dreams of new horizons and new adventures take us outside the safety of previously accepted comforts, and for those who fear to leave those comforts, the dreams themselves are dangerous. We must not forget the dangers, even though we dare to continue to dream.<sup>6</sup>

Studies of childhood and social resilience, which is another type of transformation both courageous and hopeful, show us there are four consistent aspects to resilience (Levine and Ion 2001):

- Being, a sense of self;
- Belonging, a sense of membership;
- Belief, a sense of purpose; and
- Benevolence, a sense of sharing.

Together these four aspects of resilience support an ability to transcend conditions and attitudes so that the resilient individual lives a generative and optimistic life, seeking connections, responsibility, and explorations as ways of contributing to others. Just as with the first view of the destitute women of Nepal, the first look at the conditions in which resilient individuals emerge would give an outsider little sense of possibility.

Let us look again at those earlier statistics to identify some of the possibilities and human potential they reveal:

- Two billion people live without electricity—that means, among other things, that they know how to live without that energy source, let alone dependence on wired entertainment.
- Four billion people rarely make phone calls—which means they have other means of communication and connection, and their horizons of communication are very different from our own.
- Three billion people have never seen a doctor—so among them are those who know how to stay healthy without medical intervention, and they have a different sense of what interventions are healing or necessary.
- More than 1 billion people are illiterate—which means that they have developed great resourcefulness in surviving in a world based on expectations of literacy.

Within these statistics is a world of positive deviance (Zeitlin 1990), of resilience, of transformation, which we do not understand and which we rarely explore. When considering a new literacy program, we must consider what literacy would mean to the participants and how it could change their lives. What can we learn from the so-called wretched of the earth? How can we learn from them? When considering crises such as the Asian tsunami, should we not be asking these questions before we pour “aid” into projects defined by

outsiders, however well-meaning, to the region? As soon as the basic problems of survival can be met, is it not true that the local populations must guide the next steps according to their own strengths? One of the moving moments associated with rethinking philanthropy through GivingSpace occurred at the January 2002 meeting when WORTH Nepal director Usha Jha answered the question, “What do you want from GivingSpace?” by saying, “An opportunity to tell our story.”

### ***Listening to Transformative Experience***

It seems to me that the most important potential for expanding transformation is in creating the space within which people can tell their stories. The sense of benevolence, the desire to share, begins first with our personal experiences and our sense of self. Material goods or discretionary wealth tend to serve as tokens of our selves and our experiences, and we share them or give them as an extension of who we are. Similarly, the women of WORTH share their experiences with their daughters, neighbors, and other women whom they meet through their participation in the program. Thus they are donors, or givers, of wisdom, hope, and strength. They do not see themselves as recipients of some benefit at someone else’s expense or as a result of someone else’s wealth. They are generous because of a change in activity that has transformed the lens through which they saw the world, formerly through fear but now through confidence.

To understand the particularities of that generosity requires real study of the ethnology and phenomenology of their lives, not a simple categorization into donors and recipients. We know, for instance, that a shared sense of beauty, particularly through music, contributes significantly to recovery from trauma. Similarly, we need to better understand the ecologies of care and joy and generative acts.

This is not the place to consider in detail the complexity of gift giving across cultures, but it should be noted that giving is a total social phenomenon (Mauss 1999) that crosses all the dimensions of legal, economic, moral, religious, aesthetic, and psychological relations. We significantly limit our understanding of generosity if we think solely in terms of the premises of consumption.

If we are to serve responsibly Usha Jha, the women of WORTH, and others whom we see as in need, philanthropists would do well to focus on providing a forum for sharing the people’s local stories. Often the stories of transformation among the many people in need—whom we know currently merely as aggregate statistics—inform us of possibilities beyond gestures of generosity.



In our future-focused world, we lack a memory or a tradition through which to share wisdom, lessons learned, and our own tales of transformation. Sadly, we have no way to archive the real knowledge of what does work in social, educational, community, and other interventions, and no long-term cross-fertilization across the many economies—for-profit, governmental, nonprofit, and voluntary—within which we live. But we know some things:

- Dialogues can create social change.
- Trust is earned only over time and within a context of respect.
- Hope comes from uniting our needs with our passion.
- Health, whether individual or social, requires interdependent connections. Health is not something behind us but instead exists in all aspects of being, belonging, belief, and benevolence.
- Generosity beyond self-interest is an agent of vitality, of transformational energy.

Philanthropists can therefore empower a cascade of conversations which encourage life-giving relationships and responsibility through the narrative truths willingly shared. Through establishment of a forum or storytelling space, philanthropists and volunteers can reconnect participants with a sense of vocation and with personal dignity as members of a transformational community. Vocation is not the same as self-esteem, self-actualization, or an individual quest, but is instead a calling to live life within disciplines of practice, learning, and vocabulary that provides to all who experience it a transcendent sense of vitality. Given the electronic tools available, a forum of the type proposed here could use multiple methods of connectivity to link inquiry with action and establish a true redistribution of power through the knowledge gained and the lessons learned in conversations about personal fulfillment and health.

Tim Berners-Lee has written on the evolution of the World Wide Web into a semantic tool that can help us extrapolate meaning from data. We know that humans rarely know what we know until we try to share our knowledge. Therefore, what we must focus on in using information technology is the creation of means to share knowledge and to create a tradition of valuing shared knowledge, not on the model or tool the web economy provides. Although support for *community* has become fashionable in recent verbiage, there remains a significant absence of trust in the internet as a public commons, a sacred space in which those working on behalf of the public good can share, and gain,

knowledge and support. Philanthropists could form such a public commons.

To quote Parker Palmer's (1999) essay on Seasons, "In the human world, abundance does not happen automatically. It is created when we have the sense to choose community, to come together to celebrate and share our common store." A storytelling forum could provide a place for just such a celebration, sharing, and exploration of "our common store." It would replicate the sense of abundance, in a scalable way, from the individual participants and their discrete projects to common concerns across all levels of activity.

The effects anticipated from giving to such a forum include the following (Ion 2001):

1. The creation of a trusted resource and a trusted space in which knowledge of effectiveness can be shared.
2. The establishment of meaningful measures that contribute to stability and long-term sustainability.
3. The establishment of collegiality and strategic partnerships across all efforts toward producing social health without dependence.
4. The creation of criteria of excellence and understanding of best practices in specific areas of community health, education, housing, and capacity building.
5. The conservation of skills, dedication, and commitment through appreciation and recognition in all levels of this work over the long term.

One of the words important in transformation, but all too rarely used, is "celebration." Organizational and community wisdom used to be celebrated in annual renewal ceremonies and cohesive rituals. With WORTH, Marcia and Mac Odell have expanded the Appreciative Inquiry process of change to include celebration as a means to reinforce accomplishment and create a tradition of transformation. Public commons, whether real or virtual, can provide an appreciative space for this tradition, and by doing so would help appease a deep hunger in our world.

## REFERENCES

- Cheston, Susy, and Larry Reed. 1999. *Measuring Transformation: Assessing and Improving the Impact of Micro Credit*. Washington, DC: Microcredit Summit Campaign. [www.microcreditsummit.org](http://www.microcreditsummit.org).
- Drucker, Peter F. 1994. "The Age of Social Transformation." *The Atlantic Monthly*, (November)
- Handy, Charles. 1990. *The Age of Unreason*. Watertown, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Ion, Heather Wood. 1995. "Can What Counts Be Counted?" *Women's Health Issues* 5 (Fall).
- . 2001. "The Missing Link" Unpublished manuscript.
- Kirsch, Irwin S., Ann Jungeblut, Lynn Jenkins, and Andrew Kolstad. 1993. *Adult Literacy in America*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- Levine, Saul, and Heather Wood Ion. 2001. *Against Terrible Odds: Lessons in Resilience from Our Children*. Palo Alto: Bull Publishing.
- Mauss, Marcel. 1999. *The Gift*. London: Norton.
- North, Michael, and Paul Swider. 2001. "Sweatshops and Butterflies: Cultural Ecology on the Edge." [www.greenstar.org/butterflies](http://www.greenstar.org/butterflies).
- Odell, Malcom J., Jr. 2002. "Beyond the Box: An Innovative Habitat for Humanity Paradigm for Participatory Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation." <http://connection.cwru.edu/ai/uploads/Draft%20Paper%20for%20Habitat-MTTH-%20Odel%20I.doc>.
- Palmer, Parker. 1999. *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Zeitlin, Marian, Hossein Ghassemi, and Mohamed Mansour. 1990. *Positive Deviance in Child Nutrition—with Emphasis on Psychosocial and Behavioural Aspects and Implications for Development*. Tokyo: United Nations University Press.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- In addition to the articles cited above, the following are just a few of the many books which readers may find useful in understanding transformation:
- Cooperrider, David L., and Jane E. Dutton, eds. 1999. *Organizational Dimensions of Global Change*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Dyson, Freeman J. *The Sun, the Genome, and the Internet*. 1999. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Geertz, Clifford. *Available Light, Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics*. 2000. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Gergen, Kenneth J. *An Invitation to Social Construction*. 1999. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Gunderson, Gary. 1997. *Deeply Woven Roots*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Handy, Charles. *The Age of Unreason*. 1990. Boston: Harvard University Press.
- Mauss, Marcel. *The Gift*. 1999. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Miringoff, Marc, and Marque-Luisa Miringoff. *The Social Health of the Nation*. 1999. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Saul, John Ralston. *The Unconscious Civilization*. 1995. New York: The Free Press.
- Senge, Peter. *The Dance of Change*. 1999. New York: Doubleday.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> These comments on accounting were greatly enhanced by input from David Burrill, founder of InAlysys and Wisdom Legacy. He is a financial analyst by training and has written in depth on understanding operational performance.
- <sup>2</sup> The Interfaith Health Program at Emory University has allied with the Health Assets Africa project at the University of Johannesburg to understand not only the assets and resources available across all sectors of economic and social life in support of health, but also to ask questions regarding these assets in terms of vitality and resilience rather than disease.
- <sup>3</sup> I have written elsewhere on our loss of wisdom and knowledge of what works as we lose leaders and burn out volunteers in the nonprofit world. See *The Missing Link*. [Ion 2001]
- <sup>4</sup> Frederick Turner has written eloquently on meter and neural patterns as well as on performance dynamics, especially in *The Culture of Hope* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 210. He has generously contributed time and helpful comments to this paper. There is also very interesting work being done on patterns and pattern languages in organizations, by Linda Rising, following the work of Richard P. Gabriel and Christopher Alexander.
- <sup>5</sup> WORTH is already providing a model for other programs. Malcom Odell of Habitat for Humanity has been charged with developing tools for planning and evaluation to measure and increase the effects of Habitat housing initiatives. By using an approach that is both appreciative and participatory, he hopes to establish a new paradigm in which the very processes

contribute to positive and sustainable change. He draws on WORTH for his model. See Malcolm J. Odell, “‘Save & Build,’ Scaling-up and Reaching the Poor, A Field Trip to Explore Potential Habitat and Women’s Empowerment Links,” Habitat for Humanity International, February 2002.

<sup>6</sup>Gary Gunderson of the Institute for Public Health and Faith Collaborations at Emory and the Centers for Disease Control alerted me to the importance of this danger. We must not forget that just as change requires courage, so hope requires faith.

