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CHAPTER

8

The Inner Practice of Community Development: Embracing Deep Democracy in Mexico

Patricia A. Wilson

Right now listening to you, my colleagues in different governmental agencies and universities, is an aha moment for me. I can hear that you each took in deeply the importance of working with people in this collaborative horizontal way, alongside and for the people. This work is so difficult to understand and explain. It's not an imposition of authority by government agencies ... Nor is it just about planting trees and water quality. ... I ask you all to transmit the special nature of this work and what we've learned here, including the emotions and feelings, to your agencies. This is so important. I feel this from my heart

With these words and feelings, the director of the Guadalupe Dam Watershed Commission outside Mexico City acknowledged the pivotal importance of the community development practitioner's relational awareness and process sensitivity in fostering healthy communities. The two dozen government professionals and educators that she was addressing had just completed a two week field experience in participatory action research (PAR) for

sustainable community development. They had let go of their titles, authority, expertise, programs, procedures, and plans and had begun to build trusting relationships for collaborative action. These practitioners had discovered the key to creating healthy communities: fostering interconnectedness and cocreativity in the civic arena. Not only had the two peri-urban communities changed as a result, the practitioners came out changed as well.

This chapter explores the inner practice — the thoughts, feelings, and perceptions — of the community development practitioner as change agent for healthy communities. It draws on a three year change process in sustainable development using PAR in two ecologically and socially vulnerable communities in the outskirts of metropolitan Mexico City. This ongoing project gave me the opportunity to introduce others to the role of change agent and test my own practice.

I weave together my personal experience in the two communities with that of the government professionals and educators who were introduced to participatory leadership through this fieldwork. Asking the question, “How do we know our efforts are making a difference?”, I trace the relationship between the PAR experience, the changes in the practitioners’ perception of themselves and their roles, and concrete impacts in the communities and institutions where they work. I conclude that the real measure of the practitioner’s success is the ability to continually discern and engage the emergent next steps that call the change agent forward.

Deep Democracy, the Change Agent, and Emergence

My early approach to community development ricocheted between the heady delight of top-down expert planning and the righteous battle of bottom-up advocacy. Over the last two decades, however, my work in mindfulness, dialogue, collaborative inquiry, and action research has found a practical application in building healthy communities through deep democracy.

In deep democracy, as I have described it previously (Wilson, 2004), community members recognize their interdependence and shared future. They care about the well-being of the community as a whole, and are willing to act. This conscious interconnectedness enables distributed leadership and self-organizing change — the

life-giving elements of a healthy evolving system. Fostering conscious interconnectedness in the civic arena builds deep democracy — the willingness of the individual to engage across difference, to hold the tension between conflicting values and views, and to learn from observing, listening, and acting in collaboration (Wilson, 2004).

The implications of deep democracy for community development practice can be daunting! The community development practitioner must be strong enough to let go of the accustomed role of having answers, platforms, master plans, and especially control, and instead learn to trust process and be open to possibility.

The change agent for deep democracy is foremost a catalyst. As with a tiny homeopathic intervention, the system responds to balance itself and evolve, seeking its own health and wholeness as it is capable of doing. As a practitioner, I need not know precisely what the system is capable of nor how it will unfold. The outcomes regularly exceed my expectations with results that I could never have imagined, much less engineered.

Drawing on the theory of complex adaptive systems and evolutionary systems thinking, the change agent for deep democracy views power not as a structure to be combated or deployed but rather as patterns to be shaped and created. Therefore the change agent focuses attention on opportunity, possibility, and evolutionary potential, while holding a vision of an empowered civil society actively engaged in governance through cocreative participation.

Emergence is the engine of change in complex adaptive systems. The change agent recognizes the power of emergence — the creation of new patterns that prompt the evolution of a system to its next level. “Working wilkily” as some say, the change agent for deep democracy fosters self-organizing, self-regulating change in the civic arena (Box 1).

The leader or change agent for deep democracy senses what is emergent in a community in the present moment and makes space for those emergent properties to come forth. To practice at the emergent edge, the practitioner must start with existing patterns: begin where people are; start with what is possible (Westoby & Dowling, 2013). From that space the change agent builds trust, creates a new conversation, and fosters agency. A new pattern emerges, potentially self-organizing and self-replicating.

Emergence is the act of becoming, not only in the objective world but in the subjective world of identity and meaning. This

Box 1: Roles and Skills of the Change Agent.

The change agent for deep democracy strives to accompany the community in a process of self-organized action learning: to listen to, learn from, and work with, the community. Can she see possibility, not just problems? Can he refrain from giving the residents his solutions and instead work with them in a mutual learning process? Can she sense together with the local people what positive change is ready and wanting to emerge, to blossom forth, in that community? Can he accompany the community in identifying and taking the very next action step that would help that manifest? Can she work with the community to reflect on, learn from, and move to the next action?

Most important, can the change agent for deep democracy stay in a place of resonance, acceptance, non-judgment, and trust in the unfolding process as he works with the community? Can he keep his mind and heart open? Can she be calm and confident in the face of uncertainty, of not knowing? Can she stay in the present moment with them? Can he recognize and let go of his assumptions, of the need to know, of the need to fix or solve, of the need for a particular path or outcome?

When the change agent can see the community as a living evolving organism embedded in a larger living evolving system, he can see opportunity within apparently rigid hopeless situations.

When the change agent models these skills, attitudes, and practices, his or her simple presence becomes a force for transformation.

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inner dimension of emergent practice raises the following questions: Can the leader be comfortable on the generative edge of chaos? Can she dance into the chaos, through it, and back again? Can he hold the fragile tension between order and chaos, structure and flow, intention and accident, reflection and action? (Westoby & Kaplan, 2013). Emergent leadership is an embodied practice, a felt experience that causes one to question “who am I becoming?” “who are we becoming?” “what is wanting to emerge through me and us?” (Scharmer, 2008).

The Fieldwork in Peri-Urban Mexico

The Cuenca Presa Guadalupe is an ecologically rich watershed threatened by the continuing climb of urban growth and informal settlements out of the valley of Mexico and up the mountains of the watershed. Over the last 25 years, low income settlers displaced from the valley by rising costs and intensifying development have settled on the sides of steep ravines and unserviced spaces to create new lives and new communities. The once pristine creeks and rivers that flow through these ravines have become the *de facto* sewers and waste dumps for these settlements, sending the black and gray water directly into the now unusable Presa Guadalupe Lake.

The technical director of the Presa Guadalupe Watershed Commission knew that the Commission had failed in its public education campaigns and policy tools to change behaviors in the urbanizing areas. She wanted to understand these peri-urban communities better to protect the health of the watershed. Through exchanges with the sustainable community development group at the University of Texas, the director of the Commission arranged for me to work with local government professionals and educators to engage two informal peri-urban communities in participatory action learning around environmental issues that the community members themselves would identify. These professionals were under the impression they were coming to a two week classroom seminar on sustainability with a few excursions to the communities. They were in for a surprise and so was I!

Story from the Classroom: Preparing the Change Agents

I was glad that the field project in the two peri-urban communities, El Tráfico and Llano Grande, would become a medium for introducing 24 local government professionals and educators to PAR. But I did not know just how daunting it would be for them to suspend their accustomed roles as experts, authorities, decision-makers, managers, problem-solvers, instructors, and trainers.

After an overview of PAR and what to expect for the two weeks, followed by a round of introductions, I invited them to form two teams, one to work in El Tráfico and the other in Llano Grande. Their task was to propose a game plan for their first day

in the field and present it to the plenary for feedback. One team came up with a top-down plan they were quite proud of to teach the community new skills on the first day! The other team fell into chaos and despair because, they said, no one was in charge of their group and it wasn't clear how their work would be evaluated!

At that point, I faced an important decision: resolve the tension in the room by stepping into the authority role they were accustomed to or create a safe space in which to experience the insecurity and uncertainty and work through it. I chose the latter. And the participants rose to the challenge (Box 2).

The workshop unfolded with daily rounds of fieldwork in the two communities in the mornings, followed by lunch, reflection, planning, and preparation at a nearby college in the afternoons. The two teams each worked through unaccustomed challenges. Not knowing each other, having no one officially in charge, nor having a clearly defined final product to aim for, they learned as they went. As I cited in Wilson (2015), one participant said afterward, "we were as naked and vulnerable as the residents themselves" "I was actually afraid at the beginning, it was very difficult," another admitted. "I really doubted that we would accomplish anything," expressed a third (p. 9).

When the frustration was high, I led the teams in dialogic inquiry to reflect collectively on their experiences and "become uncertain together" (Philippon, 2009, p. 29). At one point, I introduced participatory theater for each team to act out its experience. The resulting laughter was a turning point. Until then I had been choosing which team to accompany to the field each day based on their degree of uncertainty and discomfort. Afterward they began to invite me so I could see the wonderful things that were happening!

The Story from the Field: A Personal Reflection on Practice

EL TRÁFICO: LETTING GO OF JUDGMENT

El Tráfico is a community of 15,000 inhabitants founded 25 years ago as an informal settlement. Now, integrated into the urbanized area of Nicolás Romero, it is recognized and partially legalized by the municipal government.

In El Tráfico, I began to see a picture that I judged to be anything but hopeful. I saw the rigid, carefully crafted hierarchical

Box 2: A Personal Credo for Deep Democracy.

As a practitioner of deep democracy, I choose to focus on what is possible. I choose to see myself not as outside or against the system that I want to change but as an interconnected part of that evolving system. I seek to respect and understand the living elements of that system — individual and collective, human and natural. I seek to know, understand, and connect with whatever "other" or enemy (internal or external) I may perceive. I seek to care about the other and the whole, at whatever scale, from face-to-face to planetary, to see our interconnection. I seek to find my own role in fostering the next evolutionary step toward health and well-being that is wanting and able to emerge, trusting in a larger logic and wisdom to unfold. I seek attunement to that larger wisdom, a field of resonance with the emergent, and a dialogic presence with my cocreative collaborators. I am vigilant in my mental hygiene to let go of disempowering thoughts, of cynicism, despair, and condemnation.

As a change agent for deep democracy, I hold my professional and personal opinions lightly, as propositions to be tested, rather than positions to be defended or imposed. I develop my inner intuitive knowing, not just my rational analytical knowing. I value and foster collaborative inquiry and choose to create spaces for such inquiry to flourish wisely, through cycles of dialogue, action, reflection, and collaborative learning. I learn to hold the tension between competing views, to practice "not knowing," and to see the result as a fertile field of possibility. I seek to discern where my professional knowledge, my expertise, can contribute to the collective process rather than overwhelm or undermine it.

As a trainer of change agents for deep democracy, I aim to replicate and exemplify the practice of deep democracy in the classroom: self-reflection, dialogue for building shared understanding, collaborative learning and inquiry, group deliberation and decision-making, and participatory action learning. I aim to facilitate a transformative learning experience. Thus I am not a trainer at all. Rather, I create a space for the participants' own learning, action, and reflection. The critical learning is not the mastery of the methods of participatory engagement but rather the inner practice of the facilitator.

structure of the political party in power at the municipal (county) level reaching down into the community (*colonia*) through self-serving clientelistic relationships. The party's point of leverage was the local leader Señora E, who maintained a tight control on the local community by replicating the paternalistic power structure locally.

As a result of her party loyalty, commitment to the community, and constant hard work, Señora E had won considerable municipal benefits for this relatively poor community: several paved streets, piped water twice a month for most households, a new middle school, and other amenities. The system worked—but not in the participatory horizontal way it needed to, in my opinion, to be really healthy.

It didn't take long to feel my negative opinion coloring my interactions, tarnishing my joy, affecting others on the team, making us feel rather helpless and hopeless. The rigidity of my own assessment was not serving me nor our effort at deep democracy.

I made a conscious effort to look again, to see the possibility, the potential, the spaces for change, the fluidity in what had seemed solid, dead, or moribund. As I got closer to the community, connected more deeply, and listened more closely, I saw spaciousness in the lattice work, I saw fluidity in the frozen structural, and I saw opportunity for change. I could see the hierarchical clientelistic structure calcifying on its own. I didn't need to oppose it, nor even criticize it. There was no enemy to fight, only old self-reinforcing patterns slowly crumbling from entropy, ready to evolve, already giving birth to something new. I looked for the life-giving elements, even in the very players who held the rigid top-down structure together.

With patience and hopefulness, our team of professionals, students, and myself went forward with the community and its leader. Each morning we rearranged the chairs in the meeting room from straight orderly rows facing the head table into a circle, only to find them the next morning in uniform rows again. On the fourth day, we found the chairs in a circle! That was the morning that Señora E confided to me just how tired she was from her decades of work for her party and her community.

That same day the women that Señora E had recruited for us decided themselves on their next step: making thread and yarn out of the plastic bags strewn in trash heaps and clogging the creek. A quick demonstration by one of our Mexican team

members launched the women into making their own beautiful creations, since they already knew how to sew, weave, knit, and crochet. The ladies gathered plastic bags each afternoon and returned in the mornings to share the bounty and pick the colors for their designs.

As they knitted and crocheted, the women talked about themselves, their families, and their community. They came from different neighborhoods of El Tráfico, yet found so much in common. The women decided to continue gathering every Friday morning—not to please Señora E nor to get something from her—but because they saw value in getting together and were creating the value themselves.

The women wanted to involve men from the community in building a retention wall with discarded tires. Señora E chose an active party member's house for the demonstration. The next day the community was abuzz about the utility of old tires, which disappeared quickly from the creek bed and empty lots.

On our team's last day in El Tráfico, the meeting room overflowed with people: women wanting to learn to knit with plastic and men wanting more ways to reuse tires. As the women's circle knitted, they recounted their accomplishments over the last 10 days. Teenaged girls sitting on the floor in the middle of the circle drew or wrote down what they said: the plastic bags they had recycled; the earrings, purses, shawls, and tablecloths they had made; their impact on all who saw their creations; and the ongoing circle of women they had formed (Wilson, 2015). The women's pride and sense of accomplishment was contagious and soon the men's group had come up with a plan: making fences with discarded plastic bottles, the third major contributor to the nonorganic waste stream after plastic bags and old tires. Señora E, smiling with satisfaction at the energy, warmth, and happiness in the room, told us that "something really important has shifted here over these two weeks. It will no longer be the same." Perhaps she was referring to the new sense of interconnectedness, initiative, and creativity that was palpable.

A year later, the women's group continued to meet, collect plastic bags, and sew (Wilson, 2015). They had taught their technique to many women in El Tráfico and some in other communities. A few were selling their products commercially. The women continued to meet each Friday on Señora E's patio, to talk, sew, and act. Used tires now fetched a price. Señora E was working to get a piece of *ejido* land for a community park and negotiating with the government for full legalization of land titles.

Box 3: Mindful Action Rules for the Participatory Change Agent.

Ten rules I try to work by:

1. When I'm sure I know what needs to happen next, I question my assumptions.
2. When I'm judgmental about what is happening, I question my assumptions and open my heart.
3. When chaos breaks out, I stand calm and confident, and wait for 30 minutes, knowing that something beautiful will emerge beyond what I could have imagined or planned.
4. If I notice I'm trying to control, I let go.
5. If I let ends become more important than means, I step away.
6. If I begin to doubt, I remember to trust in the collective process.
7. If things begin to flow, I know I'm meant to do this.
8. If people are praising me for my work, I know I have failed to make it *their* success.
9. When I feel myself wanting to tell others what to do, I move into inquiry with them about what's possible and what *they* see as next steps.
10. I remember that I am working with them to realize their vision, not mine.

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LLANO GRANDE: DEEP LISTENING AND STAYING CALM

Smaller and poorer than El Tráfico, Llano Grande is an informal community settled over the last 10 years. Considering it "irregular," the municipal government provides no infrastructure for water and sanitation.

Much to the surprise of our team of professionals, students, and myself a police escort followed us to Llano Grande on our first day there, under orders from the municipal government concerned about our safety. Señora L, a young leader and party member, had been the only one to receive us that morning; but as soon as the police escort showed up we heard whistles being passed from person to person throughout the community.

Shortly this early warning system produced a hostile group of people led by a rival community leader, Tomás. Carrying his machete and accompanied by tough-looking young men, Tomás let us know we were not welcome, that they would do *whatever* (poignant pause!) was necessary to defend their land and homes from us.

This could have been an excellent moment to get back on the bus and leave! Nevertheless, our team stayed and listened to the venom, bravado, and underlying fear that Tomás and his people had to spit out about how outsiders had bought up land nearby and displaced their people. Finally when Tomás and his group had nothing more to say, we asked if they would like to know why we were there. Apparently surprised by our team's calm demeanor and willingness to listen, they said yes. We said we were there to work with the community in taking a few steps closer to creating the kind of community they wanted to live in for the long term. Tomás relaxed a bit and let us go off with Señora L and about a dozen of her people who had gathered during this confrontation. In the meantime, we had sent the police away.

Was deep democracy possible in a very poor community that was fearful of losing its land and divided into antagonist factions? The participatory change agent starts with what is and looks for emergent signs of positive movement. The emergent shadow side of this community would be, of course, further division and fear. Community healing was a prerequisite for positive change, that is, conscious evolution, to occur. And that could only happen if the two factions could come together. Was that possible? We didn't know.

Señora L agreed to put the word out, with the help of our team, for a community meeting the following day to plan a community park she said that everyone wanted. A weedy stretch of sloping land with a broken swing and seesaw, the designated parkland surrounded a crumbling church whose last priest had left the year before. The church and the parkland were seen by all as neutral territory, not belonging to any faction. We gave it one more day.

The next morning, a sizeable crowd slowly gathered to participate in the park planning. But not Tomás and his people. As I talked to Señora L, someone spotted Tomás a block or so away working on a car engine. The perfect opportunity! Would Señora L see the importance of inviting Tomás to join her in the park design process? She resisted until I asked, "Would you like to take the park design to the municipal government and say,

'Here's our park proposal that some of us put together?' Or would you rather say, 'Here's our park proposal that the whole community created together?'" She walked over to invite him. Purposely none of us on our team accompanied her; if the divide between her and Tomás were to be bridged, she would have to do it herself.

We watched in silence as she walked the block by herself and talked to Tomás. The conversation lasted several long minutes. Then she turned to walk back — with Tomás! We felt we had witnessed an historic moment in Llano Grande. And we were ready to commit to working there.

Tomás and Señora L joined the park planning group just as the children were finishing their earnest presentations and the adults had begun, one by one, to present their drawings and ideas. The facilitator asked Tomás to contribute his thoughts. He offered many galvanizing ideas that showed his concern for the community. He and some of his people stayed another hour to talk informally with Señora L and her people. The barriers came down as the group found common purpose and common ground. That day a lot of healing happened in Llano Grande.

On our closing day, Tomás's people and Señora L's people gathered together at the school to review what they had accomplished over the 10 days: not only had the community come together for the first time to create a collaborative plan for the park, they had worked on garbage separation and recycling, composting, seed germination, and making trash cans for the park from recycled plastic bottles.

The reward for our team was the warmth, the smiles, the appreciation, the sincere invitation to return; their pride in what they had accomplished; and most important the ease and solidarity that we could see between Tomás's people and Señora L's people.

Eight months later, the park plan had become a reality. Sprouting a playscape made of brightly painted discarded tires, the new park was a source of community pride, cohesion, and vitality (Wilson, 2015). A year after the field workshop, the community was moving forward to measure, record, and legalize their plots.

Outcomes

The closing ceremony for the professional participants was a chance for both teams to come back together and share their

personal responses to the intense experience. The responses that were shared, along with written evaluations, provided rich narrative to code and cluster. The results are described in detail in Wilson (2015). The majority of the professional participants described one or more personal, affective, or relational impacts — that is, a felt experience that somehow changed them. The following three themes emerged.

A NEW EXPERIENCE OF TEAMWORK

Some were most moved by the closely knit teamwork that had evolved: moving through the chaos and uncertainty of not knowing their teammates nor having a clear idea of expectations nor having someone in charge to tell them what to do; figuring out how best to contribute to the team effort, realizing one's own capacity to contribute and be respected; learning from each other and respecting each other; being lifted up by the strength of the team to keep coming back each day, learning from experience and moving forward; enjoying the satisfaction of teamwork; and making new colleagues and friends.

DEEPER CONNECTION WITH THE COMMUNITY

Frequently mentioned was the experience of a deeper connection with the community — valuing the opportunity to listen to community members, learn from them, work shoulder to shoulder with them, respect and appreciate them, earn their respect, and connect with them in a heartfelt way. "I could see my own niece and nephew in the eyes of the children," said one practitioner through his tears.

PERSONAL CHANGE

The most frequently mentioned theme was personal change: becoming aware of one's own assumptions, prejudices, and attitudes of superiority or disdain toward community people; learning to trust process and open to the present moment; becoming comfortable with not knowing, not being in control, nor having established procedures to follow; and letting go of the role of expert, decision-maker, or technician.

For the majority of the practitioners, the two week experience in participatory community development had touched them at the level of values, attitudes, feelings, and relationship. It had been an embodied felt experience of conscious interconnectedness. They had skated together on the edge of emergence — the

undefended openness to possibility in the moment that characterizes participatory practice — and had come out changed. In so doing, they had experienced a deeper connection not only among themselves but also with the communities. They had experienced deep democracy. As one agency official articulated, “The kind of democracy many of our elected officials have promised our nation and that we’ve been struggling to put forth — this kind of democracy is what we experienced during these two weeks.”

Impacts

While almost all the government professionals and educators who participated in the workshop were deeply affected by the two week experience in participatory learning and action, I wanted to find out how much of that change they could carry over into their work lives and institutional settings. Would the old patterns overpower the new perspectives, or would the new patterns become seeds of change? Six-month follow-up interviews with 15 of the 24 professional participants reported in Wilson (2015) revealed the following changes.

INDIVIDUAL CHANGE

Community relationships

The majority described noticeable changes in how they relate to, and communicate with, people in the communities where they work: redefining their work as supporting the community and the projects the community defines, listening attentively to community members, working *with* them, showing respect for community residents and their values, and as one said, “doing my work with love, like in Llano Grande.”

Workplace relationships

Nearly half of the government professionals also expressed having changed the way they relate to their coworkers and employees: treating staff, colleagues, and team members with more respect and tolerance; sharing more openly; asking for input and feedback; relating on a more personal level; and being attentive to others’ reactions and responses.

Teacher-student relationships

Most faculty participants reported significant changes in their pedagogy. One professor, an agricultural engineer, explained

that despite the authoritarian pedagogy of information delivery that she was trained in, she realizes the importance of engaging students in research about their own ecosystem: “The students in my soil contamination class live on agricultural lands nearby. I now engage them in doing their own field research, then we apply what they have found and learned.”

Another professor recounted a similar change in her pedagogy:

The very next course I taught after the workshop, we focused on team projects. Each team built a small retention pond at someone’s home. The students learned they could build the structures easily and cheaply. Their parents saw how practical it was.

One respondent, who works in local government but also teaches at a preparatory high school in Nicolás Romero, shared this:

The workshop definitely changed my way of teaching — transformed it literally. I now do inquiry, action, and reflection with my students to rediscover the environment in which they live. What I experienced in the workshop I’m doing with them, inside and outside the classroom. All three of my classes have received this very well. They feel listened to and respected. In one class ... they mapped every ecological problem they could find, first on the campus and then in the community. Then they visualized and prioritized their actions, just like we did in El Tráfico. There are so many actions they want to take now. I accompany them and give them whatever information sources might be helpful, and they decide what they want to do. They plan and carry out everything. I don’t even do any of the arranging! We are just two weeks into the new semester and they have already organized two field trips to the municipal ecology office, ... created a campus environmental club, and started a recycling and composting project. ... The head of the school is amazed! In 15 days we have achieved a revolution in this institution.

INSTITUTIONAL CHANGES

Most of the government respondents reported having little or no institutional influence beyond their immediate work teams or staff

(Wilson, 2015). However, institutional change has been quite significant among the two universities and one high school represented in the workshop. A professor from the local technological college, Universidad Tecnológica Fidel Velázquez (UTFV), said that his institution now realizes it had overlooked the relevance of community. "We had no relationship with local communities," said another professor, "until this workshop!" Spearheaded by the three professors who attended the field workshop, UTFV has consciously built upon the relationships started during the workshop to connect students and faculty with local communities, especially El Tránsito, and develop community-focused internships and service learning courses for students.

The changes in classroom pedagogy introduced by the high school teacher who attended the workshop not only galvanized her students to action but resulted in school-wide institutional changes. Within a year, the students' composting initiative became a one acre organic garden on the campus. The students cultivate high-value crops such as amaranth and chia seeds as well as organic vegetables. They have learned to market them and manage the business. Data from the organic produce business feeds into math, statistics, technology, and sustainable agriculture courses. The school has received news coverage and multiple awards.

The participants from the Universidad Albert Einstein (UAE) became aware of the significant difference between their accustomed community service orientation and a participatory action approach. They felt aligned with the values of PAR. One year later, during our next field-based workshop, the rector of the UAE asked for advanced training in the theory and methods of PAR for the faculty and senior students who participated in the fieldwork. In Fall, 2014, my graduate students and I designed and conducted a three month on-line course with biweekly live interactive sessions for eight faculty and students from UAE.

Upon completion of the course, UAE launched a new major in their human development program called sustainable community development (DECOS), with PAR as the primary tool of engagement. Two of the online course graduates coordinate the degree program and fieldwork. Now two years after the field workshop, DECOS faculty lead biweekly field trips with UAE students to Llano Grande and another community in the mountains, and are preparing for its second incoming class of students. These students will go on to take positions in local schools, government, business, and nonprofits.

SENSING THE EMERGENT EDGE

With these developments at UAE, the nature of my university's involvement is changing. Our yearly field workshops are no longer anchoring UAE's community engagement efforts, but rather complementing them. The annual visit of the University of Texas team in 2015 became an opportunity for the UAE faculty and students in DECOS to show us their ongoing work with the communities, ask questions, participate in coaching circles, share their insights and learning, and deepen their inner practice of participatory community development.

I sense a significant evolution in the emergent edge of our work in Mexico—a new kind of interconnection. Building upon the grounding in direct community engagement, we are now cultivating a local network of the change agents that have emerged from our field workshops and the DECOS program in PAR. Where this will lead is unclear now. We may expand the local network to elsewhere in Mexico, deepen locally through partnerships with local government and nonprofits, or build knowledge networks through horizontal exchanges with similar clusters of change agents in other countries. Just as the communities, we work in are evolving, so is the role of the University of Texas team. We look for what is possible, for what is emergent, for what is ours to do. There are no laurels to rest on nor benchmarks to measure ourselves by—just emptying to inner guidance, flow, trust, and the sense of serving something larger. The compass is deep democracy, in essence the inner experience of interconnectedness (Wilson, 2004), which serves as a guide to healing and wholeness both inside and out.

Summary and Conclusions

Regarding my own practice as a change agent for deep democracy, the experience in El Tránsito drove home the importance of being vigilant about my thoughts, particularly judgmental thoughts that close down the heart. Awareness of one's thoughts creates the opportunity to let go of a thought that is not useful before it does harm. Such emptying is a prerequisite to presencing (Scharmer, 2008), the openness to discerning what is wanting to emerge. Emptying is a practice of mindfulness, being fully present in the moment. My experience in Llano Grande reinforced the importance of deep listening. It was the deep listening that gave us the strength not to flee and trust to bring the two factions together.

The experience of introducing the 24 government professionals and educators to PAR through the workshop and accompanying fieldwork in El Tráfico and Llano Grande reinforced an important lesson for me: The pedagogy must be consistent with the practice. In this case, the temptation to resolve the insecurity of the participants by stepping into the authority role gave way to the instinctive knowing that it was better to create a safe space in which to be uncertain together. That choice allowed the participants to go through the eye of the needle and find their own resolution. They could then do the same with the community participants and experience the satisfaction of seeing results much greater and more useful than they could have planned or engineered.

Six months later, the majority of workshop participants interviewed could point to better relationships with the communities where they worked and with their teams and colleagues. Most of the educators had begun to engage their students through participatory inquiry and action.

Significant institutional changes have since been made at both universities to develop ongoing relationships with local communities. UAE sends a faculty-led team of students to Llano Grande twice a month. UTFV goes monthly to El Tráfico. UAE has hired and trained faculty to teach PAR. In late 2014, it launched a new major in sustainable community development using PAR as the primary method of engagement.

The sustainable community development group at the University of Texas has begun to focus on supporting, rather than anchoring, the efforts of the two universities in Mexico to engage local communities using PAR. Our annual field workshops are designed now to bring together the change agents for deep democracy that have emerged from our previous work there, engage them in coaching circles, and link them with similar clusters elsewhere. We continue to look for what is emergent and what is wanting to be expressed through us.

Conscious connectedness begins in the heart and mind of the individual — whether an outside change agent, a local leader, or a community participant. It sparks an inter-subjective unfolding: the transformation of identity from I to we. Like a catalytic meme, a self-replicating fractal, or a homeopathic healing agent, this transformative process can carry the emergent seed of societal or systems evolution to the next level of consciousness, caring, and creativity. Through inner practice, the community development practitioner can become present and attentive to the pulses, pressure points, and possibilities of a community, holding spaces

for realignment and transformation. The community development practitioner becomes a midwife to healthy community.

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