

Reflective Essay: “A Transformative Learning Experience”

Whole Systems Design – Antioch University Seattle

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I have been deeply touched by a perspective put forth in some of the readings and discussions in this seminar reminding us that the student-teacher relationship is, at its heart, a *sacred* relationship, with a precedent going back for millennia. As teachers, “our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students”¹ I take this point of view very seriously for I realize the profound implications inherent in the ‘vocation.’ The very real and inevitable consequences arising from sharing in and influencing the intellectual and spiritual growth of ebullient, inquisitive, relatively innocent and trusting young people carries a significant responsibility that cannot be taken lightly.

This potential for a sense of sacred relationship is as real for professors of physics or economics as it is for teachers in my chosen field – which may be summarized as “Sustainable Community Design.” In this field, a connection to the sacred or spiritual is often explicit. For example, in the current course in “Ecovillage Design” that I am teaching,² I wrote to the students in a weekly Facilitator Feedback memo: “To me this work is essentially ‘spiritual,’ and I will qualify that remark: It is spiritual because we are learning how to integrate with, attune to, and work with natural and cosmic patterns and processes to consciously design our built environments. It is also spiritual because the work is intending to auspiciously influence the evolutionary progression of humanity, and thus the Earth within its larger systems. Could this be the ‘seed’ generation?” This attitude of essentially (i.e. *in essence*) spiritual or sacred work is verbalized not only by me but by many in the larger ‘movement.’ For example, the ecovillage of Findhorn states quite unabashedly that their mission is to serve as a “point of light” to influence the spiritual regeneration of the planet. And so, either intuitively or knowingly, the students who are attracted to this type of course or learning experience are already treading a spiritual path or are wishing to initiate one.

An introductory course in “Ecovillage Design,” then, must be designed in such a way that it can serve as an initiation for some and an affirmation for others *in addition to* being a widely multidisciplinary presentation of substantive, practical ecological/permaculture design material. An eclectic mix of spiritual/sacred traditions and perspectives ought to be not only accepted

¹ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, p. 13

² Despite some initial reservations, I am growing more comfortable using the active, more authoritative verb ‘to teach’ as compared to the more polite, power-sharing verb ‘to facilitate.’ I am discovering that it is necessary to consolidate one’s power before entering the learning arena and on occasion *to teach*.

but encouraged, and space should be made available for their designed or spontaneous inclusion. The course should be organized in such a way that it is *itself*, in its duration and extension, a ceremony or ritual – for it has the potential to be a rite of passage for some and the sought-after nugget for others. A subtle, meaningful, coherent blending of university-level academics and universal spiritual practices is the result. The goal is for a genuine transforming experience to occur within the framework of practical, accredited ecological design work.

As the teacher of this facilitation process (the verbs are now correctly oriented), as the meta-designer (the designer of the design process), I am keenly aware of my immense responsibility. This awareness has plunged me into a sublime transforming experience of my own. It has been necessary for me to openly question my ability or existential qualifications to lead such an inquiry. I have been extremely diligent, deliberate, and patient in preparation for this opportunity but I am now experiencing a well-deserved and healthy chance for re-evaluation. Who am I to pretentiously anticipate the needs and aspirations of so many bright seeking young people? Who am I to pretend to have the solutions that the world needs for its evolution? I am feeling that vulnerability and deep questioning that is the fertile ground for emergence into a new level of being. Indeed, a new level of being is now *required* just to complete successfully the course that is already underway.

In this sense, the students are presenting me with a real opportunity for healing on a very deep level. I must release some old emotional baggage and self-defeating habits I have been carrying around so that I may be as clear and accessible as possible. It's time to evolve! Our mutually-influencing transforming experience and the specific student-teacher and student-student relationships that is its context then become truly sacred, for we are guiding each other in and allowing for our whole-person unfoldment, in the name of the greater living whole of which we are a part. Externally, I am more than qualified to present a course in "Ecovillage Design" through prior preparation and experience. Internally, I am coming face-to-face with my own self-actualization process, a quality-of-being mentioned in the readings. For many years now I have been the intelligent, motivated student-with-a-purpose content to remain in the background as a participant-observer. Now that I have the opportunity to share all my learnings and come to the forefront, I am suddenly transported to a different pole. I have been deeply influenced by TAOism and the principle that the teacher leads by example; ideally, there is no need for words. What, then, is the example I am displaying to my students? I feel that I must reach a level of impeccability, refinement, wisdom and mastery only glimpsed or imagined before.

This gets so personal: I feel so exposed being the 'teacher' – but therein lies the transformation. I feel like my whole life and personality are being opened up for examination, critique and judgment. In an ordinary university student-teacher relationship, I would be able to project myself for awhile, during classtime, and then retreat and evaluate during the long hours of the week when the students are not present and I am off in another world. But in my

situation, the students are always there; at least they are always coming and going. I am always there for I have practically taken up residency on the site that is the focus of our design work. I have set up my office in an old sauna. I am often out working on my Permaculture Demonstration Site. I read and write, meditate and do yoga out on the lawn in front of the stage that we built. I believe that it is essential to be present as much as possible for that is the basis of good ecological design: to identify and resonate with the particular place that is being scrutinized and shaped. Ideally, all of us – students, me, any co-facilitators, and all the other life-forms involved – would actually be *living* on the site in some sort of base camp with our classroom and Design Studio there as well. We would be eating, sleeping, singing and chanting together. We would be right there doing our work until the buildings and residences started going up so we could move into them. This is a truly organic way to create an ecovillage (or in our case an "Ecovillage Demonstration Site"). Then the creation has the chance to become a *living system* because it is *self-organizing*, *self-creating*, and *self-maintaining*. Sustainable settlements are human-scale and they are designed and constructed by the people who will be living there.

In this type of learning experience scenario, the student-teacher relationship assumes a whole new dimension. Love, dismay, conflict, friendship, attraction, uncertainty, growth and joy are all occurring in an intimate personal context. This is community; this is the transforming experience. The teacher in this scenario – that is, the one who assumes responsibility for guiding the process to a desired conclusion – must learn to live in paradox: There must be some control while relinquishing control; the boundaries between 'student' and 'teacher' will remain fuzzy as the teacher is always learning from the students. A goal must be explicitly articulated and continually referred to and yet there is no goal – there is only the process. Each participant must self-actualize as a highly individuated part and yet all the effort is being exerted for the greater whole from which each part is constituted. The teacher will need to be very centered and grounded, almost unshakeable, and so a disciplined meditation practice is advised.

This is Life; this is the 21st century; this is Sustainable Community Design; this is *Whole Systems Design*. We are establishing the new paradigm by living it. The living is the learning and the learning is the living. Those who have come before must teach those who are following – and we are all working for those who have yet to come. The sacredness is in the intent: I want to be of service to my students! I want all of us to be of service to Gaia. I want to be a teacher of teachers, and when I'm done with them I want to scatter them like seeds so they can sprout somewhere else and recreate and perfect the process I have taught them. Somehow, I have survived and arrived at the point to be able to present to others who are following my vision and version of Paradise, and to be able to frame the whole dialogue under the formality of an 'accredited learning experience.' What an awesome privilege. What an awesome opportunity. What an awesome RESPONSIBILITY. My personal experience in the whole affair will tear me asunder and rearrange me in a pattern that can more graciously benefit the greater wholes I

wish to serve. Good – I have been patiently, steadfastly waiting for this ‘transforming learning experience’ for a long time now. “This is Unity, this is Family, this is Celebration, this is Sacred...”³

³ These words come from a Rainbow song.