

*unfolding
human
potential*



The Fullness of Self

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From our perspective as co-host of the Unfolding Symposium, we are delighted with the experience that was co-created during the course of the two days, the extent to which the collective experience touched each of us, and how the time together continues to resonate for so many. Most especially we are grateful for our partnership with NIVOZ – the people and the organization. The collaboration was generative, inspiring and joyful, creating opportunities that were unforeseen. In many ways, the experience of the symposium and the way it was developed represent a perfectly aligned manifestation of the qualities and practices of all who participated.

Having experienced a sense of wholeness through the event, there is little to say. Still, as Learning for Well-being (L4WB), we would like to offer some brief reflections on certain elements that we saw expressed and that we think it is important to remember, to celebrate, and to continue to grow.

The theme of the symposium – *Unfolding Human Potential: a dialogue on core qualities and practices* – provides a framework for addressing some of these elements by considering the following phrases: unfolding, human potential, dialogue, core qualities and practices.

Unfolding

Unfolding is especially meaningful for those of us in the L4WB community. It is a word we use in relation to everyone's unique potential, the vital energy and qualities that provide meaning, purpose and direction to an individual's life. The unfolding of every person's unique potential requires us to encourage self-discovery and the expression of each one's particular gifts and contributions, thereby nurturing the flourishing of the undivided and evolving self within each of us. By acknowledging the importance of meaning and purpose in every life, we give priority to processes that contribute to the well-being of individuals as well as whole communities and societies.

Unfolding suggests a quality and action of allowing what is natural to come forward within its own direction and timing. Those of us who are "growers" – whether plants, people, or organizations – know that the key is in finding the environments and circumstances that support the specific situation, rather than offering a standardized solution to all. Francisco Varela, a Chilean biologist who focused on studying living systems and applying ecological principles to human cognition and consciousness, asserts that *if a living system is out of balance, the remedy is to connect it to more of itself*. In a literal sense, his words are easiest to comprehend in looking at systems such as streams or forests which need to function as organic wholes for health, but they are equally applicable to humans, individually and collectively: when we find ourselves in unhealthy or unbalanced

circumstances, we need to become more essentially who we are – connecting to and expressing our deepest selves.

Another nuance of *unfolding* is that it requires us to begin from a positive position. This is positive not in a judgmental or emotional sense, but rather the sense of what is actually happening. So often our attention is drawn to problems, deficits or what is not working, but the concept of unfolding suggests that we begin with what is functioning and what is alive in the moment. This was richly evident in the form of the symposium through its intention of starting with practice rather than theory, but it was also obvious in the ever-present question: what can we learn from practitioners who are bringing themselves fully to their endeavors? It seems to us that this simple positioning – beginning with what is working – enlivened and informed the entire experience of the symposium.

Human Potential

Human potential was present as a central theme throughout the two days. The use of the term “narratives” seemed to emerge from the opening sessions, highlighting the importance of experiencing every speaker as a whole person, to witness the context of their lives, and to understand the meaning they have derived or overlaid on their personal narratives. Sharing and listening to one’s own stories, and the stories of others, is critical for empathy and the sense of connection that fosters all those moments of genuine encounters.

There was another level of narrative that we experienced that is equally important to the personal stories, and that is the archetypal (or mythic) narratives that were evidenced in the stories of the wisdom keepers in the film, *Down to Earth*. We noticed the extraordinary presence of the men and women sharing essential truths, rooted in their own traditions but connecting to the wisdom of our collective humanity. What stands out is that amidst the

diversity of location, language, traditions, and cultures, there is an underlying unity to their messages. It is a unity that calls us to our shared humanity, and to the larger patterns of which we are each part, across time and space.

A further aspect brought by the film is the window into other ways of knowing – through the wisdom keepers themselves and how they were accessing reality and the world around them – through the imagery of the film – through the remarkable and yet step-by-step journey of the Winters family – through our response to the experience, and through how we continue to have a reactivated subtle sense of connection to multiple ways of knowing, often still unexplored, that lingers as we reflect on the Symposium. The question remains: how do we access these other ways of knowing on an ongoing daily basis, with ourselves, our children and within our systems?

Dialogue

Dialogue has many different definitions, ranging from casual equivalency with the terms “discussions” or “conversations” to more formalized conventions, such as those inspired by David Bohm, which focus on exploring the process of thinking together. We relate to the definition that goes back to the original Greek words of *dia* meaning “through”; *logos* translating to “word” or “meaning” so dialogue equates to “flow of meaning.” However, we especially appreciate the information from Bill Isaacs on the ancient meaning of *logos* being to “gather together” or “relationships” so that dialogue becomes a conversation in which people think together in relationship. This fits very well with the experience of the symposium.

A central principle of L4WB is seeing one another as competent partners, including children and adults. This does not imply that

anyone relinquishes their responsibility to the others but that there is an underlying respect and commitment to allow relationships to flourish. The practices in the schools set the stage for the acknowledgment of competency (from the job interviews to the evaluation of the school to the mixed age communities of learning) but every layer of the symposium from the filmed practices to the interviews to the roundtable discussions, and on to the comments by the academic experts echoed this profound curiosity and respect. The tradition of each child presenting a “morning surprise” captured this beautifully ... but so did many other moments within the films and the symposium discussions.

Core qualities and practices

The last phrase of the theme that we want to explore is *core qualities and practices*. L4WB has identified nine core capacities (and practices that support those capacities): relaxing, sensing, observing, subtle sensing, reflecting, listening, inquiring, empathizing, and discerning patterns. These simple capacities/practices are what we saw expressed in the interactions of practitioners with their students and teachers, and in the course of the symposium among participants. They contributed to the unfolding of our deepest expressions, the connection to our humanity, and the relationships between us. Luc Stevens spoke of wondering if there is a grammar and vocabulary associated with the unfolding experience. For L4WB, we believe the core capacities and their associated practices relate to this grammar, but more in the sense of what the architect and visionary Christopher Alexander speaks of as a “pattern language” -- the elements that invoke aliveness in any building project. Alexander asserts that the single invariant feature of all successful processes of growth is that they can be experienced as alive and whole. The core capacities that we have identified share this feature of aliveness, as well as depth. We know, for example, when we are listening in a way that genuinely connects and opens to the other.

The core capacities offer a common language that may serve much the same function as what Luc offered as “grammar and vocabulary.” In a very real sense, as Alexander describes, we cannot name the quality that we can experience, but we can recognize it and we feel its absence. This is the language that we want to bring to ourselves, and to our students, and to our colleagues. We touched it in the symposium, and it continues to resonate.

Learning for Well-being

Learning for Well-being focuses on cultivating capacities and environments that support learners to lead happy, healthy and meaningful lives. The emphasis is on the process of each of us learning to be more finely and deeply human (through attitudes, practices, and choices.) Attention to process always involves relationships – not just with other people, but also in how we relate to ourselves, to the environment, and to the material and spiritual aspects of our lives.

Interest in well-being has developed out of the recognition that a well-lived life – a life that we would hope for our children – is not measured by educational achievement, household income, a self-reported level of satisfaction or happiness. Well-being is a much more dynamic process in which the fullness of what it means to be human is expressed, in context, and in interaction with our fellow humans and the planet on which we live. It is both ephemeral and concrete; complex in concept yet simple in practice. We want to measure it so we know how we are doing – individually, in our education systems, in our communities, in our nations, and across the globe. It is difficult to define well-being as a measurable concept, yet we know a great deal about what helps people lead happy, healthy and meaningful lives. We know that we can describe those factors in a holistic fashion and we consider these dynamic interactions as “well-being.”

Suggestions

As Learning for Well-being, we have some specific suggestions for education that were confirmed through our time at the Symposium. First, we need to acknowledge that each child is born unique. By natural design, we are configured differently. Catering to individual differences is considered a priority in education policy and yet very little is done at the level of daily classroom interactions to take account of different ways of learning, communicating and developing for both students and teachers. If children are only seen for their “deficits” -- how they don’t measure up to the expectations for the curriculum or the rhythms of the classroom – they begin to spiral downward. They think of themselves as failures, their parents believe it, and the negative labels began to accumulate.

Second, we need to understand that the relationship between teacher and student can be the most significant factor in learning. It is so important that teachers don’t judge or use shame to control their students, but instead create a welcoming atmosphere that enables a sense of connection and personal meaning. Simply cultivating a relationship of empathy and respect can shift a child’s experience of school.

Third, engagement may be the most fundamental factor for generative learning experiences. We want to make an important distinction here between engagement as opposed to pro forma participation in which students are active in the classroom. *Engaged* participation requires that everyone involved (students and teachers) has an interest and a stake in the outcome/decision. Learning requires the learner’s active participation, stemming from curiosity, genuine interest, and the willingness to co-create the learning experience. It also requires that the teachers are actively participating at their level of responsibility.

All three of these elements require a shift in how we think about education, its purpose, and the role of well-being in it.

Overriding vision

We need to come forward with an overriding vision, and here is where we link back to the remark by Varela about living systems, and the need to reconnect an unbalanced system to more of itself.

A living systems perspective rests on the premise that all of life is interconnected and interdependent, and thus how we nurture our relationships is the key to how we experience all other factors in our lives. If we live in an increasingly interconnected yet fragmented world, we must acknowledge ourselves as individuals while still maintaining our connections with those around us – people in our communities, people and societies across the world, and most particularly with our planet.

We need the well-being of all of those elements, interacting as living systems, to be a source of meaning in our lives and in our education systems. We can not do it without empathy ... first, for ourselves; then, for others; and finally for the natural systems of earth.

Is this idealistic? Of course! That is simply the point ... to reconnect each of us as human beings, and the systems in which we live our lives, to a fuller sense of ourselves – including our ideals.

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society that invites the contribution of each child and young person as competent partners and in which they live meaningful, joyful and healthy lives.

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