Defining Inner Work for Social Change

A conceptual paper by Shirley Pendlebury

INNER WORK *for*
SOCIAL CHANGE

Fetzer Institute SYNERGOS
Building trust works

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The Inner Work for Social Change Project

Synergos and the Fetzer Institute began the project on Inner Work for Social Change in 2018 to explore the role of inner work in social action towards a better world.   Through commissioned case studies, and in dialogue with thought leaders, development practitioners, activists, and others, the project aims to spark a global conversation on how reflective practices can make social action more aware, ethically attuned, effective, and sustainable.

Within the project, *inner work* encompasses any form of reflective practice that increases awareness of self, others, and the systems in which complex social problems arise. Inner work here is a purposive notion, conceptually tied to outer work for a more just and caring world. Inner work is core to *bridging leadership*, which is the capacity and will to build trust and tap the fullest contributions of diverse stakeholders, helping them to come together across divides to work in concert for the common good.

Six in-depth case studies, spanning diverse geographies and sectors, unearth how inner work helped leaders to deepen their sense of purpose, build trusting collaborations, and amplify impact on a range of issues. The case studies portray partnerships that addressed complex social problems in different parts of the world – child undernutrition in India, Infant and maternal mortality in Namibia and the Philippines, Dysfunctional schools in South Africa and Brazil, and a fragmented agro-economy in Ethiopia.

Together with this conceptual paper and a cross-case analysis, the case studies throw light on why the connections between inner work, bridging leadership, and collaboration are so crucial in action for a more just and caring world.

Defining Inner Work for Social Change

Gretchen Ki Steidle

Introduction

"Inner work" is a multifaceted concept that goes under various names and embraces many different practices and purposes. This paper focuses on the connection between inner and outer work, between who we are and how we act in the world, individually and in concert with others. It proposes a definition of inner work that honors this connection.

The paper is a companion piece to six case studies and a cross-case analysis that form the core of the Knowledge Project on Inner Work for Social Change launched by Synergos and the Fetzer Institute. Over a period of some sixteen months, project participants convened in four workshops, in different parts of the world, to reflect on inner work for social change. Laced through the paper and stitched into an appended sampler, reflections from individual participants illustrate their lived conceptions of inner work.

The notion of inner work

Inner work for me is a process that begins with developing your capacity to be present in this moment, and by doing so, you become aware of all of the unconscious patterns that we usually use to protect ourselves and navigate the world around us. And as we become more aware of those unconscious ways of behaving, we actually begin to have the capacity to change them. As we go through that process of change, we are able to heal those unhealed parts of ourselves, manage our reactivity, develop greater and deeper levels of self-understanding, and an understanding of what we're meant to be doing, our sense of purpose and meaning so that we can manifest that in the world. And we can honor the same unique pathway of each and everyone else so that we relate to the world with deeper levels of compassion and love and engagement.

Inner work – whatever we call it – encompasses a wide array of practices, processes, and purposes. With roots in age-old and steadfast traditions of spiritual formation, inner work is also at home in new theories of consciousness, in conceptions of transformational leadership, in popular approaches to self-improvement, and in some new social movements and social justice ecosystems.

Broadly defined, "inner work" denotes "any reflective practice that allows an individual to contemplate and invest in their own personal growth and transformation." This definition is both terse and commodious. It includes assorted modes, traditions and practices. It sets no standards for the quality, depth or demands of different reflective practices and so admits the trendy and superficial along with deep, enduring, and disciplined investments in personal transformation.

Within the Knowledge Project, inner work is a *relational* and *purposive* notion, conceptually and purposively tied to outer work for a more just and caring world. Inner work is defined **in relation to** leadership for collaborative action to address complex social problems that arise in situations of scarcity, conflict, disaster, inequity, or injustice. Inner work is defined by the *purpose* it is intended to serve, how it serves this purpose and what connective tissues enable inner work and outer action to cohere.

Whatever its mode – guided reflection, journaling, mindfulness practice, reflection-in-action, vision questing, creative play, or retreat into stillness and natural beauty, to name but a few possibilities – inner work in the Knowledge Project is not primarily about the contemplative life or personal growth for its own sake. Its *purpose* is to prepare leaders and activists who can nurture and engage in collaborative action to address pressing social problems, who can sustain their commitment, and who can cultivate mutual trust in the face of inevitable obstacles to collaboration.

Inner work is purposive at a more profound level, too. Ideally, it is a practice through which leaders and activists come to realize their own sense of purpose and to recognize and tame their internal impediments – such as fear, prejudice, stuck thinking – to whole-hearted reflective action in concert with others.

I think an action grounded on a clearer sense of purpose and values leads to more meaningful work … When I was in Med School and I was looking for this kind of higher sense of purpose that I wanted as a doctor, I was led to a role of community service. What I experienced then was that dealing with really complex issues is a burden to the self. If you have this superficial knowledge of yourself, you can just give up and do reactive things. What I learned through my journey in the Bridging Leadership program is that in this kind of complex environment with its challenges, knowing a sense of purpose in yourself and relating it to the work, actually inspired more meaningful actions on my part … If I didn't have that deep level of self-awareness, I would have left my area.

Heidee Buenaventura

To me inner work is the work you do on yourself to try to overcome barriers that are preventing you from realizing your potential, or fulfilling a purpose, or really working well with other people to make change. It could be a blind spot you have. It could be that you're not able to listen to certain perspectives. It could be that you feel uncomfortable in certain spaces. I think being aware of that and working to change that if you believe it's important, that's what inner work is.

Andrea Rodericks

A first-take definition

In the Knowledge Project, inner work is a process of individual and group reflection that helps to build trust among diverse stakeholders and enable their mutual understanding of a complex social problem to be addressed as well as the system in which the problem occurs. For the purposes of the project, "inner work" can be defined, in a rough first take, as *any form of reflection that increases leaders' awareness of self, others, and the system in which complex social problems arise.* This first take, however, misses a crucial element – the role of reflection in the process of ongoing collaboration. Other missing elements emerge if we attend to the words "inner" and "work".

Photo: Kathryn Uhl

Initiatives of Change, Asia Plateau, Panchgani - Inner Work for Social Change Workshop, 2019.

Inner and outer – Neither one without the other

"Inner" and "outer" are relational, spatial concepts. To speak of an inner space or an inside or an interior is to imply an outer space, an outside, an exterior. For every inside there is an outside, and for every outside an inside. This is a matter of conceptual grammar, but it is not merely this. How human cultural practices and ways of seeing come to regard certain "things" as having insides and outsides is, more importantly, a matter of ontology, a deeply embedded view about the nature of being.

The idea of inner work takes for granted that there is such a "thing" as a self (or mind or spirit or "heart") located "within." This inward idea of the self has become "common sense," at least within the so-called Western tradition, and plays an important part in self-understanding. We think of our feelings, thoughts, ideas as

being "within" us and the objects in the world as being "without"; of spirituality as being "within" and materiality as being "without."

In his monumental book *Sources of the Self*, Charles Taylor traces the beginnings of this moral topography to St Augustine who introduced the inwardness of radical reflexivity, through which we become aware of our awareness, try to experience our experiencing and focus on the way the world is *for us*. Of course, meditation and other forms of contemplation had been practices long before Augustine. As long ago as 1500 BCE, the earliest Vedic schools in India practiced meditation, as did the Chinese Taoist and Indian Buddhist traditions from about the fifth century BCE. Further west, early practitioners included Philo of Alexandria, the Desert Fathers, and Marcus Aurelius.

The Filipino concept of *loób* epitomizes the relational nature of a self. *Loób* (literally "inside") can refer to the inside of a physical object, like a vase or bottle or house. Said of a person, *loób* is the core of personhood as relational will, a will always directed towards other people or spiritual entities. *Loób* in this sense has no meaning unless it is understood in tandem with *kapwa* (loosely translated as "shared identity," "shared self," or "self-in-the-other"); it comes into being only insofar as it is fully embedded and integrated in a web of connectivity.

To speak of inner and outer worlds, then, need not imply a hard boundary between self and world, mind and matter. Instead, we might see the relationship between inner and outer worlds as an open, creative conversation or dance that leads to increasing wisdom. The metaphor of the dance comes from an application of Goethe's delicate empiricism to activism. A delicate empiricism, Allan Kaplan and Sue Davidoff contend, requires us to be true to what is out there, which in turn is illuminated and becomes itself through what we bring to it, how we see or encounter it. "Neither one thing nor the other, but both, dancing together in the finest of relationships."

Work and workings

Why *"Inner Work"* rather than, say, "inner toil," "inner journey," "inner quest," or "inner workings"? Andrea Rodericks offers an answer: "The reason that these practices are called inner *work* is because they require discipline and effort to cultivate. They can become more valuable as we deepen, adjust, learn, adapt them over time, sometimes practicing them with others we trust. There is an element of skill and expertise in inner work."

These thoughts resonate with findings from a recent study of spiritual change outside of institutional religion. In the study, a motif of work pervaded participants' narratives, which portrayed inner work as a deliberate, vigorous and continuous conscious act involving internal efforts to transform the self. Two intertwined strands of inner work laced the narratives. The first, "spiritual-psychological," strand aimed at cleansing emotional toxins, peeling unpleasant layers, and clearing other hindrances to spiritual change to reveal a more authentic core self. Participants spoke of turning their gaze inward to become "more accurate about oneself and one's life." The second, "spiritual-transpersonal," strand involved expanding self-awareness and consciousness towards seeing the wholeness of things, enabling a sense of interconnectedness, empathy, and benevolence.

This suggests that inner work is, inextricably, both personal and transpersonal. An inward gaze enables a generous and discerning outward gaze; a more authentic, lucid self enables a sense of interconnectedness. None of the participants in the cited study saw inner work as toil or forced labor. As demanding and difficult as it may be, inner work is not mere toil. Rather it calls upon willing, whole-hearted engagement.

"Work," as a noun, is also associated with the arts, with works of literature and music, painting and sculpture, theater and dance. Here "work," as a verb, involves deliberate, usually ongoing or iterative creative effort to some end – an opus. With inner work, the opus is a more attuned, aware and interconnected self. Part of the task of inner work lies in the formation of character, a person's enduring traits, the sensibilities, attitudes, beliefs, and values that affect how a person sees, acts, interacts, and lives.

Inner work and *inner workings* are not the same. Watches, airplanes, bodies, and brains have inner workings. For our purposes, "inner workings" refers to the functioning of the human brain. Recent neurological research provides growing evidence that various forms of inner work, specifically formal meditation and mindfulness practices, can over time change the structure and functioning of the brain. Evidence of the effects of mindfulness practice on the brain's plasticity

("neuroplasticity") confirms centuries-old wisdom about spiritual practice and personal formation.

Changing habits of mind and cultivating mindful awareness are not easy. Gretchen Steidel cites a study that found that on average people spend nearly 47% of their waking hours with their minds wandering. Sakyong Mpiham reminds us that "gathering the scattered mind is a gradual process;" not something to be accomplished once and for all in an epiphany or a single short retreat from a buzzing world. While the Knowledge Project does not focus on inner workings, the case studies suggest that, with some notable individual exceptions, the reflective practices in the different social change initiatives may not have had the depth and continuity required for enduring changes in participants' habits of mind.

A second-take definition

The various connotations of "work" suggest a refinement to the first-take definition: Inner work is any form of *deliberate and ongoing reflective practice* that increases leaders' awareness of self, others, and the system in which complex social problems arise.

Photo: Shirley Pendlebury

Asia Plateau - A gong calls us to quiet time

Inner work and leadership for social transformation

A relational, purposive understanding of inner work is common to many approaches to transformational leadership and activism. The idea that self-transformation is an enabling, perhaps necessary, condition for social transformation cuts across conceptions of bridging leadership, leadership without borders, leadership for conscious social change, leading with wisdom, global leadership for transforming the world, and "a delicate activism," to name but a few of many examples.

With varying degrees of intent and intensity, all these conceptions put inner work at the heart of leadership, although they may not call it "inner work." All insist on the relationship between inner and outer work for a better world. In each, inner work (no matter how it is named) is a source of aware, compassionate, collaborative, and courageous leadership. Each recognizes that leadership is not only about what we do; it is about who we are. The idea of connection permeates all these approaches; for some, the connection goes beyond spanning the divides among people to embrace a more thorough-going holism.

Bridging leadership is pivotal to the Synergos approach and to the Health Leadership and Governance program in the Philippines. A bridging leader is one who is able to bridge divides to bring people into trusting collaboration with one another to understand and resolve a complex social problem. Trust is the "glue" that enables collaborative action across the different kinds of divides that are created in situations of scarcity and conflict. For Peggy Dulany, building trust involves "finding ways to create safe containers in which people can encounter each other outside the immediate circumstances that divide them."

In the design philosophy of Conscious Social Change, mindfulness practice helps leaders to lead from within, and to shift away from models that divide, blame, or force. Guided mindfulness practice helps leaders to find ways to connect across divides and embrace "the wisdom, participation, and leadership of as many stakeholders as possible, especially the most marginalized," writes Gretchen Steidle.

Leading with Wisdom – an approach used by the Centre for Value Education in Delhi – assumes a flow of natural qualities from inner being to outer being. Two of these

qualities help to transcend the divides among people: love and trust. The quality of love "flows as conscientiousness towards people, planet and the overarching mission and vision;" the quality of trust "flows as unconditional acceptance of meaning in stakeholder engagement and relationships."

The Kellogg Global Leadership Program aims to deepen understanding of communion as the right relationship among all people. By forming hearts and informing minds, the program grounds emerging and transitioning leaders in values of discernment, empathy, judgment, and courage to create lasting community and enact social transformation around critical global issues.

An ideal of profound connectedness motivates the work of the Fetzer Institute whose long-term goal is "a broad-scale, spiritually grounded transformation from an ego-centered way of being grounded in separation and fear to an all-centered way of being grounded in wholeness and love." This is about a fundamental transformation of our whole way of being, it is about the integration of the inner life of mind and spirit with the outer life of action and service.

In a different way, a sense of the wholeness of reality infuses the practice of a *"delicate activism"* proposed by Allan Kaplan and Sue Davidoff of the Proteus Initiative. Anchored in a reciprocal, respectful relationship between ourselves and the world, this is "an activism that seeks to change the world through being open to being changed by the world … In this openness and reciprocity, we are at one with the world."

Heart and eye: Why inner work for social change?

In their different ways, each of the approaches to leadership and activism in these illustrative sketches is a response to complex problems of our times. They recognize that well-intentioned "interventions" frequently fail to address the problems of inequality and social injustice; globalized poverty and its multiple deprivations; environmental degradation and violent conflict, to name but a few. They recognize, too, that unreflective interventions may retard the change they intend to engender.

Motivations for placing inner work at the heart of leadership and activism for social transformation are ethical as well as ontological, practical as well as epistemological.

They take seriously the questions of what it means to be human, of how *who* we are relates to *how* we are, and how we act, in the world. A true and open heart; a discerning, alert, and sensitive eye – these metaphors of heart and eye convey the spirit of motivations for inner work in social change initiatives.

Unless we examine the terrain of the human heart, Daniel Groody believes, we fail to penetrate "the veneer of global disorders." For him, the work of global transformation begins in a more rudimentary inner transformation of the human heart that symbolizes the whole process of human understanding that "can only be grasped from the depths of one's being, the place where the human and the divine intersect."

Integrity and vision – ways of being and ways of seeing – are recurring themes in motivations for inner work among those who hope to shape a better world. In his short article, "Integrity, Integral Vision and the Search for Peace," Mark Gerzon pinpoints three questions we must ask ourselves if we are to practice integrity: how I am connected to the world outside the borders that define "us?"; how does what we call "us" and "them" fit together into a larger whole?; and how can I become more aware of "the whole thing?"

For Gretchen Steidel, the ethical motivation for inner work rests in the integrity and responsibility required of those who have the influence to change the lives of others. Ethically, we are compelled "to create such transformation while embodying the same principles of integrity and justice we hope to see in the world. Our outer work will reflect our inner work. And our inner work begins with mindfulness." In an interview for the Knowledge Project, Gretchen reflected on how inner work can deepen understanding of the change process:

> *… as you go through that process of building a deeper level of presence and self-awareness and learning to change those aspects of yourself that were once unconscious, we realize that the change process is not actually that easy. We grasp at it. We resist it, and we spend so much of our time in the social change world, focusing on what everybody else has to do to change. But instead, when we use inner work, we become a student of change. We can examine it from the inside out, and we then build a greater level of human understanding and compassion for how*

Participants share in small groups at a Synergos-led retreat held in South Africa.

everyone else experiences transformation so that we can approach our social change work very differently. And inner work shifts the way in which, then, we diagnose social issues, the way we build relationships, and the way we solve those problems collaboratively, inclusively.

When we impose too mechanistic a frame onto the flow of human processes we diminish the possibilities of human freedom and responsibility, Allan Kaplan and Sue Davidoff remind us. A delicate empiricism recognizes that our knowledge from experience and sensory observation cannot renounce the meaning that we make of what we sense and experience; at the same time the meaning we make of the world cannot ignore its basis in the world. This view of the nature of reality gives rise to an ethical motivation for reflection and awareness: "A delicate activism cannot do anything in the world that it will not have done to itself; it cannot expect anything that it cannot expect of itself; it will never find anything that it does not bring."

Inner work in theories of change

Inner work is a central element in the theories of change held by Synergos and the Fetzer Institute, who launched the Knowledge Project on Inner Work for Social Change. This section sketches the place and role of inner work in each and considers points of coherence between them.

The Synergos theory of change

Synergos is an approach-based organisation, whose mission is to bring people together to solve complex social problems and create opportunities for individuals and their communities to thrive. The idea of collaboration is built into the very name of Synergos –s*Ynergia (syn* "together", "with" + *ergon* "work"; "activity"): working together; working cooperatively. Collaboration lies at the heart of the Synergos approach, which has four interrelated components:

Systems thinking – looking at complex problems from diverse perspectives to identify root causes, understand how elements influence one another within a whole and what resources are needed for continuous improvement.

Collaboration– working together in multi-stakeholder groups to garner collective knowledge and resources for concerted action; enabling the formation and growth to scale of *inclusive partnerships* that respect the contributions of all stakeholders.

Bridging leadership – building trust and the capacity of leaders to help people come together across divides and work as partners.

Inner work or personal reflection – practices to connect people to their core values – enabling them to be open-minded, open-hearted, trusting, and most open to learning; increasing awareness of self, others, and the system, and aligning intentions and actions accordingly.

How are the four elements of the approach related? And what causal claims, if any, can credibly be made about the impact of inner work on the social changes brought about through locally-driven initiatives that use the approach?

Synergos's founder, Peggy Dulany, describes how she sees the relationship between inner and outer work:

I'll tell you the relationship I see between the "out there" and the "in here." In order to address some of the very complex problems that we face in life, we need collaboration across groups. We need to bridge divides. But in order to do that, we need to be what we, at Synergos, call bridging leaders. What we've discovered over time is that everybody has obstacles inside themselves and that if they don't give the opportunity for reflection and space and interaction to surface those obstacles which, almost by definition, means becoming vulnerable, and releasing whatever the issues are that are inside, they won't be available to be their best listening selves and their most empathic selves. And their most self-confident selves, to be able to reach out across divides to begin to create … the social tapestry that we need to reweave in order for the world to be a place in greater harmony.

From this and various other accounts, we can tease out the causal logic of the Synergos theory of change. It runs something like this: inner work enables people

Photo: Kathryn Uhl

to realize their potential to become bridging leaders; bridging leaders are necessary for building and sustaining collaboration among diverse stakeholders in a system; collaboration among stakeholders and systems thinking are necessary for addressing the complex problems of poverty. Or to express the relationship in reverse: complex social problems arise within systems and cannot be solved without an understanding of the relevant system and collaboration among key stakeholders in the system; collaboration requires trust, a shared vision and a sense of collective ownership; these, in turn, require bridging leaders whose self-trust, openness and sense of purpose enable them to inspire trust in others; inner work or personal reflection enables self-trust and openness, and helps people connect to their core values and take personal ownership of their role in an issue. In either direction, bridging leadership is pivotal to the process, and bridging leadership requires ongoing inner work.

Theory of change: Fetzer Institute

Spiritual transformation is the core goal of the Fetzer Institute, whose theory of change focuses on how this transformation occurs. Bluntly put, transformation occurs when people awaken into and serve "Spirit". What does this mean and how does inner work for social change enter the picture? The idea of "awakening into" and "serving Spirit" might be troublesome to an agnostic or skeptical frame of mind. Much turns on what is meant by "Spirit".

Many contemporary organisations and activists who regard spirituality as a crucial aspect of practice, define it in a way that is neither narrowly theistic nor tied to a particular faith. For example, Sonali Sangeeta Balajee, a social justice activist and researcher, writes:

Spirituality may be most usefully understood as a noun of the original root of the word spir-, *meaning "breath" or "purpose" […] It is the reality of interconnectedness and wholeness (not perfection), as much as it is the journey to experiencing these. To that end, the yearning for and experience of this wholeness is deeply based on both the realities of living and of death and impermanence. Spirit-based practice is*

inseparable from social justice and, when realized, is "the highest form of political consciousness."

The Fetzer Institute proposes a notion of Spirit that embraces both theistic and nontheistic belief systems: "Spirit" means the "something more" – within and beyond physical reality – that binds us and all things "in a deeply interconnected, meaningful, and sacred reality." A central tenet of the Institute's theory of change is that meaning, purpose, and love are part of the fabric of reality and so are essential to social transformation. Six elements make up its strategy for social change: spiritual transformation; a new narrative infused with deep existential hope; a global movement carried on the wings of Spirit; nurturing spiritual communities; and engagement with science to open space for Spirit, free will, and purpose in a scientific understanding of reality. The relationship between the six elements constitutes a theory of change.

For the Fetzer Institute, inner work is integral to personal spiritual transformation. Its theory of change is built on the idea that a critical mass of people must be spiritually transformed to bring about necessary social transformation, and inner work is what brings about personal spiritual transformation. Part of the guiding purpose of the Institute is "the integration of the inner life of mind and spirit with the outer life of action and service." Although Fetzer sees transformation as a spiritual process, it is also interested in secular ways of engaging in inner work. The ideal of profound connectedness permeates the Institute's guiding purpose, based on the idea that wholeness, spirit, and love are integral to the fabric of reality.

Trust, hope, connection, and love

While the Synergos and Fetzer theories of change have important differences, both focus on change towards a better world; both recognize – in different ways and with different emphases – the complexity, persistence, and ecosystemic nature of problems that undermine individual and community well-being.

Trust, hope, and connection run as golden threads through both theories and their founding assumptions. Both recognize fear and separation as impediments to trust and thus to change for a better world. Trust lies at the heart of bridging leadership and collaborative action; it is also necessary for nurturing and sustaining hope,

especially the deep existential hope envisaged in the new narrative the Fetzer Institute promotes. Hope here is the deeply felt conviction that the future is not entirely settled. This kind of hope appeals to the possibility of creativity. It's an audacious and inspiring hope, seeking to cross bridges not yet built, and perhaps not even imagined.

For Mark Gerzon, who has played a crucial role in developing the notion of bridging leadership, building trust is *the* pressing issue of our times. During a video interview for the Knowledge Project, he mused:

> *The biggest issue facing humanity is not oil, whether we run out of oil or gas. The biggest issue is not climate change. The biggest issue is whether we're going to learn how trust each other and beyond trust, to love each other. And if we don't know how to trust each other as human beings, we're finished. So, I believe bridging leadership in this project is so important because it's about building bridges of trust, where either there has never been trust or the trust has been broken down […] And when someone says it's not as important as climate change or not as important as poverty or it's not as important as democracy – I say, you're not going to deal with climate change, you're not going to preserve democracy, and you're not going to alleviate poverty unless people work together. So that's what this project is about: trust and building bridges of trust.*

Trust and love (in the sense of compassion or *agape or karuna* or *Ubuntu*)*,* too, are intricately connected; and connect us with one another. Desmond Tutu, in his book *No Future without Forgiveness,* writes that to say someone has Ubuntu is to say "you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate […] It is to say, 'My humanity is inextricably bound up in yours.' We belong in a bundle of life*."* The notion of self-in-and-through-others is present, too, in the paired Filipino virtues of *loób* and *kapwa.*

Love is vital to the Fetzer Institute's theory of change; it sees love as the antidote to fear and isolation and the key to spiritual and societal transformation. Love is central to a sense of "sacred reality," the truth of existence that lies beyond the physical

Photo: Shirley Pendlebury

world, and is at the heart of the world's faith traditions. This love is selfless and unconditional, and is the product of inner work and spiritual transformation.

Connective tissue and the place of inner work

What is the connective tissue between inner and outer work, between reflection and action, between personal change and social change? To pose the question in this way is to refuse a causal conception that demands proof that inner work has a direct, measurable impact in successful social change initiatives. The relationship between inner work, individual and collective action, and social change is of a different order.

The connection between our inner selves and our work in the world is both intricate and delicate. How we act and who we are "inside ourselves" are inextricably entwined; our beliefs and values, feelings and attitudes, shape what we notice and how we act. Whether we acknowledge it or not, the inner life of mind or spirit is integrally related to our actions in the outer world. As Carolyn Brown puts it, "each of our actions bears the footprints of our souls."

Within the Knowledge Project, the focus on inner work is motivated by a recognition of the complexity of persistent social problems that undermine the well-being of individuals, communities and societies, of the earth and its resources. Food insecurity, environmental degradation, poverty, violence, high infant and maternal mortality rates, systemic racism, and other failures of social justice are but a few examples. While not unique to our age, the troubled times in which we now live present a glass through which we may see more clearly the systemic nature, and interconnectedness, of global as well as local problems, in the so-called developed as well as developing worlds. The COVID-19 pandemic reveals the fissures that cleave humanity into rich or poor, privileged or deprived, loved and connected or abandoned and isolated.

The causes and effects of such wicked problems are interdependent, entwined in multilayered ecosystems. Root causes and final effects may be far apart in time and space, they may span generations or continents. Affected communities, experts, politicians and policymakers, development practitioners, philanthropists, and civil society at large may have very different, perhaps conflicting, understandings about

a problem's causes, its possible solution, and what counts as a solution for whom. Each of these groups may act in ways that subvert efforts to halt the spread of a problem or manage its effects. Apparent solutions, no matter how well conceived, may spawn a problem in new forms or in new places.

Difficult though they are, wicked problems are not intractable. They call for third-order change, namely, for a fundamental rethinking of the problem and of the roles and relationships of all parties needed for its possible solution. This kind of change is hard. It means letting go of cherished identities and arrangements, finding ways of collaborating with others whose views or values may be at odds with ours. It depends on co-creating a new kind of social reality by reshaping relationships and systemic patterns. This is where inner work has a vital place. This is why inner work is not out of place in social change initiatives.

There are two other senses in which we might ask about the place of inner work. One refers to the context or situation in which the need for inner work arises; the other is about where inner work takes place ("within" the self or in the world outside). Place as context concerns both the setting of a social change initiative and the space (or ecosystem) of the problem to be addressed.

The case studies in the Knowledge Project are all set in democracies in the global south. All, except Ethiopia, are postcolonial states. Most are set in places with a history of inequality, exploitation and social injustice, places where the divides of gender, race, ethnicity, class or caste, faith and language may tear the fabric of trust that undergirds any genuine collaborative venture.

Trust is the connective tissue for any human interaction or enterprise where one person invites or enables another to take responsibility for something she or he cares about. When we trust we make ourselves vulnerable to another's power to harm us or the things we hold dear. Trust is fragile, easily broken and difficult to mend once damaged by betrayal, carelessness, incompetence or ill will. When a collective memory of mistrust is pervasive, there can be no hope of authentic collaboration; mistrust contracts the horizon of the space of connections.

Along with trust, other connective tissues for coherent collaborative action are an open heart, an open mind and an open will. Hope and trust together enable

collective agency. Where there is no hope that the problem can be addressed, collective agency isn't possible. How do we strengthen connective tissues and keep them healthy? How do we mend torn connective tissues or weave them where they may never have been?

The case studies that accompany this conceptual paper portray the connections between our inner selves and our work in the world and show how these connections

Photo: Shirley Pendlebury

Seasons Retreat, Kalamazoo, March 2020

play out through the multilayered ecology of human action and interaction. They depict some of the processes that can encourage and support people to make meaning and build trust in their own agency – individually and collectively. Vignettes and examples illustrate the connective tissues between inner and outer work, between reflection and action, and how each can enrich and direct the other, how each brings to the other a deeper awareness of how one is in the world, and how an absence of reflection may impair collaborative action.

Inner work, as a form of reflective practice in social change initiatives, takes place both "inside" ourselves and outside in the material world, as well as in the liminal space between. An inner-outer dance, an agile and sensitive movement between the inner and outer realms at different levels, "opens our hearts and anchors authentic, trustful, loving relationships and collective social action."

Inner work may take place in silent, solitary contemplation or attention to the breath, as well as in courageous conversations, individual or collective creative play, in learning journeys and visual representations of a system (or web of connection), and one's position and role in it. Inner work has a place at the start of a collaborative project as a way of engendering trust, hope, courage, and collective agency. But inner work is not only a prelude to action. It has a place throughout initiatives of change, and beyond – for when we lose heart or forget our purpose, for when we become angry or frustrated with colleagues who let us down, for when we despair because the apparent solution has spawned unexpected difficulties, for when the work of collaboration has drained our energy and eroded our resolve. Ongoing inner work safeguards a hard-won spaciousness of heart and mind; it exercises and fine-tunes awareness and the capacity for being richly responsible.

Revisiting the definition

The second-take definition proposed that inner work is any form of deliberate and ongoing reflective practice that increases awareness of self, others, and the system in which complex social problems arise. We might now add that it is any reflective practice that enables an individual or group to connect to a deeper sense of purpose and become more effective agents for social change. Inner work lies at the heart of bridging leadership, which is the capacity and will to build trust and tap into the fullest contributions of diverse stakeholders, helping them to come together across divides to work in concert for the common good.

Photo: Kathryn Uhl

Appendix: A reflective sampler

Edited extracts from video interviews with Knowledge Project participants – Kalamazoo, Michigan, November 2018; Swakopmund, Namibia, March 2019.

On inner work

In Sesotho we have a saying that means "Listen to yourself". And in many circumstances you've been told to go and listen to yourself when you've done something wrong. Or even you yourself can volunteer to go and listen to yourself when you feel you've done something wrong, "I need to go and listen to myself" and listening to yourself is, is not just you listening to yourself, it's not listening to the noises in your head, although you may have plenty, but it's much more to say look to yourself relative to the values that you have for yourself, or the values that the society, the community, the people around you have and to which you are aligned

Morabo Morojelo

Throughout history, human beings have tried to think about how to renew themselves, to a better self, the world, or our Gods, whatever. All religions talk about how you must transform yourself, be a new person. And now, corporations talk about mindfulness, about how to think differently about yourself as a corporate person. It's not new. The novelty here is when you think about inner work as how to transform yourself to better serve … all the people, the community … but in a very intentional way, not because you need to serve a God, which is fine, or because you need to serve a corporation, but, because you, yourself, understand that you must be a better person – to yourself and to the rest of the people. So, this is the subtle difference about inner work and I think it's fundamental. I think we are living in a society in which people are not really thinking about others. There is a lot of politicization, a lot of hate. People are getting tired of that … So, that's why I think inner work is so important.

Renato Guimarães

Inner work, to me, is about restoring, realigning, and regenerating the vital resources, the strengths that are critical to balance my inner self with my outer action. As I go out in pursuit of things in life, whether it's about work or family … and all those aspirations that I pursue, it's very important to be anchored in what the core of me is, what the sanctity of me as a person is. So, being able to link up to that, being able to restore that balance, any practice that helps me do that, that's inner work to me   […] How does a social value creation process happen? How do individuals and institutions anchor themselves in their inner spirit and the foundations that exist inside them about love and compassion and care for the world around them, the people around them, how do they go about … their work? By drawing from those things within.

Vijay Shakar Kantham

Inner work for me is a practice that you don't do sometimes but that, in the journey of growing self-awareness and self-reflection and self-understanding, becomes embedded in everything that I do in my life. So, it's ongoing … My reflective capacity is happening in every moment. It's not something that I pause to do, but that happens all the time and shifts completely the way that I relate to others. It has really helped me to understand the ways in which my judgments, my biases, my assumptions have very much to do with my own lack of integration and wholeness. So it's been a moving journey of owning and integrating those aspects of myself. I guess I'm on a path which I can see will never end, but it enables me to become more and more open to myself and to the world …

Sue Davidoff

Inner work is about leading from within; and change making is about things outside. If we are not settled on things within us, there is hardly any possibility for us to be impactful in the outside world. So for people in the change making work, I would say inner work is not an option but, rather, a requirement or a must […] There is an urgency to do things outside without giving any space, time or opportunity for inner work and of course this has led to burnout, relationship issues, deep frustrations,

and so on … So I would say it is not an option but rather a must for everyone involved in change-making work.

Kurian Thomas

I think it is almost impossible to understand the world around us, which is difficult by any means, if we do not have an understanding of ourselves. So the starting point is really to find out who you are and how you relate to that outside world. You don't have to define the outside world and whatever the outside world may be for you, but it does help to be intrinsically interested in why it is that it is like that. … So it's really the deeper understanding of the world around us and a deeper understanding of ourselves, and the relationship there.

Henri van Eegen

On trust, self-knowledge and inner work

How do we create trust? In this project, and one's own life, by beginning with yourself, an inside-out approach. You need to know yourself before you can actually be much of an agent for anything, but let's say an agent for good. If you don't understand how you are behaving and why you're behaving that way … what sort of emotional responses you are having, then I think you're not going to be able to behave in an honest way and you won't create a platform or bond of trust with anybody else. I think we can see when someone is being honest and when we can trust them and when we can't. Not always, but, I think we're able to see when someone is being true, true to themselves and true to us.

Dee Dee Yates

Trust establishes that safe space where a person can be vulnerable and also be authentic. In my experience, this will actually somehow facilitate conversations that can deal with hard issues or superficial issues. But I think the issue with trust is really establishing that safe space for authentic conversations to happen … In the work that I do, where complex issues are being surfaced and are very challenging, trust is a very important foundation.

Heidee Buenaventura

The journey of trusting ourselves is very much connected with trusting others … there's very little that can happen that is generative in social life without trust. … When there's trust, there's a gesture of openness and expansiveness. Where there's lack of trust, there's a gesture of closed-ness and fear and contraction.

Sue Davidoff

Photo: Kathryn Uhl

Case writers and project team, Namibia 2019

Notes

[1] For examples of inner work in new social movements, see: the Initiative for Contemplation, Equity & Action (ICEA), *ICEA Journal, Special Issue on Social Justice, Inner Work & Contemplative Practice: Lessons & Directions for Multiple Fields* 1, no. 1 (July 2017); Sonali Sangeeta Balajee, "An Evolutionary Roadmap for Belonging and Co-Liberation." Othering and Belonging 3 (2018).

[2] Steidle, Gretchen Ki, Rachel Kiriakos, and Sarah-Marie Hopf, "Landscape Map of Inner Work for Social Change." A preliminary landscape map of the field developed by Circles for Conscious Change for Synergos (February 2019): 2.

[3] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).

[4] Jeremiah Reyes, "*Loób* and *Kapwa*: An Introduction to a Filipino Virtue Ethics," *Asian Philosophy* 25 no. 2 (2015): 148–171.

[5] Allan Kaplan and Sue Davidoff, *A Delicate Activism: A Radical Approach to Change* (Cape Town: The Proteus Initiative, 2014), 11.

[6] Andrea Rodericks, Knowledge Project case writers' retreat, Swakopmund, Namibia, March 2019.

[7] Pninit Russo-Netzer and Ofra Mayseless, "Spiritual Change Outside Institutional Religion as Inner Work on the Self: Deep Within and Beyond," *Journal of Adult Development 24* (2017): 1–14. doi:10.1007/s10804-016-9241-x

[8] Matthew A. Killingsworth and Daniel T. Gilbert, "A Wandering Mind Is an Unhappy Mind," Science (November 11, 2010).

[9] Sakyong Mipham *Turning the Mind into an Ally* New York: Riverhead Books, 2003), 59.

[10] Peggy Dulany, "Approaching the Heart of the Matter: Personal Transformation and the Emergence of New Leadership." A Paper in Celebration of Synergos' 25th Anniversary, 2012; Peggy Dulany, *Building Trust Works: Why Inner Work for Social Impact* (Synergos 30th Anniversary Paper, Synergos, 2017).

[11] Mark Gerzon, *Leaders without Borders: Five Principles of Global Leadership and Citizenship* (2002). Mark's manuscript was an important source for the initial conceptualisation of bridging leadership at Synergos.

[12] Gretchen Ki Steidle, "Leading from Within: How Mindfulness Drives Effective Leadership and Social Innovation," Executive Forum, *Leader to Leader* (2018).

[13] Centre for Value Education, IIT (Delhi).

[14] Daniel Groody, *Globalization, Spirituality, and Justice: Negotiating the Path to Peace* (New York: Orbis Press, 2007). See also Kellogg Institute for International Studies, Global Leadership Program website, https://kellogg.nd.edu/about/outreach-initiatives/global-leadership-program.

[15] Kaplan & Davidoff, *A Delicate Activism*:

[16] Dulany, *Building Trust Works*, 24.

[17] Steidle, "Leading from Within", 3–4.

[18] Centre for Value Education, "Leading with Wisdom", slides shared by Vijay Shakar Kantham.

[19] Kellogg Institute for International Studies, Global Leadership Program website, https://kellogg.nd.edu/about/outreach-initiatives/global-leadership-program/.

[20] Fetzer Institute, Theory of Change and Organizational Development Strategy, January 2019: 5.

[21] Kaplan & Davidoff, *A Delicate Activism*, 29.

[22] Daniel G. Groody, "Globalizing Solidarity: Christian Anthropology and the Challenge of Human Liberation," *Theological Studies* 69 (2008): 262.

[23] Groody, "Globalizing Solidarity", 262.

[24] Mark Gerzon, "Integrity, Integral Vision and the Search for Peace," *Integral Review* 2 (2006): 10–13.

[25] Steidle, "Leading from Within".

[26] Video interview, First Workshop: Knowledge Project – Inner Work for Social Change, Fetzer Instute, Kalamazoo, Michigan, November 2019.

[27] Kaplan & Davidoff. *A Delicate Activism*, 29.

[28] Peggy Dulany, excerpt from video interview, Knowledge Project – Inner Work for Social Change, Workshop, Fetzer Institute, Kalamazoo, Michigan, November 2019.

[29] Synergos, "Trust, Collaboration, and Collective Learning: Synergos Experience in Namibia and Ethiopia," in *Harnessing the Power of Collective Learning: Feedback, Accountability and Constituent Voice in Rural Development*, ed. Roy Steiner and Duncan Hanks (London: Routledge, 2016).

[30] Balajee, "An Evolutionary Roadmap for Belonging," 58.

[31] This image of hope is borrowed from Gene Reeves, "Faith, Hope and Love: Some Practical Implications of Process Theology, *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 6, no. 2/3 (1985): 128–139.

[32] Swakopmund, Namibia, March 2019.

[33] Carolyn T. Brown, "Footprints of the Soul: Uniting Spirit with Action in the World," in *Essays on Deepening the American Dream* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: The Fetzer Institute, 2003).

[34] This paragraph draws insights from philosopher Annette Baier and sociologist Barbara Misztal.

[35] One of the lessons drawn from the case study "The Courage to Lead: The Bhavishya Alliance's Journey in Tackling Undernutrition in Maharashtra, India, 2006–2012."

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