

1-day workshop for Transformations 2019

Submitted by Sara Jolena Wolcott, M.Div., and Ramasubramanian

Title: Transformations for Future Institutions – experiential process to shake-up the context

Abstract

Institutions have embedded knowledge pathways that propels their way forward. Alas, those same pathways often restrict their growth and capacity to respond to the new reality of significant complexity and uncertainty such as in the case of climate change. This innovative workshop shares a set of experiential tools and a process the leaders have developed out of their work with spiritual/religious and indigenous communities in India, Indonesia and the United States that enable collectivities to invoke and engage with the unknown. We work with sound, chanting, rituals, the elements, silences, somatic movement and inquisitive dialogues in a process that is both carefully structured and emergent.

Participants bring a specific question concerning institutional change and creating new knowledge pathways relevant in their context. We interweave multiple forms of knowing into the inquiry process to address these questions. Each participant will leave having a clearer answer to their own question as well as participated in a collective inquiry into how we can create future knowledge institutions when we cannot rely solely upon the knowledge we already have. Be they academics, practitioners, community members or policy makers, participants will leave with some practical, innovative solutions, deeper dialogues, and greater revitalization.

Overview/Introduction

Institutions have embedded knowledge pathways that propels their way forward. Alas, those same pathways often restrict their growth and capacity to respond to the new reality of significant complexity and uncertainty such as in the case of climate change. Institutions have been restricted in their capacity to respond as they have approached these from within the paradigms of knowledge and prisms of disciplines that have its origins in limited cognitive perceptions. Epistemologies and knowledge pathways usually segregated to “religious”, “spiritual”, “indigenous,” “ancient” or “cultural” or overtly “ecological” spaces can be drawn upon to shake up the context of the current institutions, and create knowledge that can address some of the most pressing challenges facing the science-society interface by such challenges as climate change.

This interactive full-day workshop shares with participants an experiential process with multiple tools that has been developed by the co-leaders, Rev Sara Jolena and Ramasubramanian, who have been creatively working together for over six years. This process incorporates much of the wisdom from traditional knowledge systems in invoking the unknown: through sounds and chanting, through rituals, through the acknowledgement of the elements inside and outside as a continuum and through individually and collectively held silence in receptivity, facilitated by practitioners of the trans disciplinary processes.

Whereas most engagements with cultural tools, including music and ritual, happen outside of scientific or bureaucratic institutional structures, and are thus often seen as generating a type of knowledge that is “separate” or even “irrelevant” from more “solution orientated” approaches, we explicitly find ways to integrate core questions and concerns of societal change with these new-ancient cultural change processes.

This experiential, innovative workshop thus provides institutional leaders and change seekers from a diverse background with an opportunity to participate and contribute to the collective learning that transacts boundaries of knowledge across cultures, disciplines, spiritual practices and geographies. We address concrete problems specific to individual’s current needs as well as reflect on our collective learning from one another about how defining future institutions cannot be from the known sources of human knowledge base alone. Thus, this workshop aims to showcase a process using ancient wisdom and harmonizing it with modern knowledge to chart pathways for future institutions in an increasingly complex and uncertain world. There will be ample time for community building. Networking will be easily facilitated. We strongly suspect that academic and policy knowledge on transdisciplinary approaches will be greatly enhanced through this workshop. These practices have been used by both Ram and Sara Jolena in their own work. Ram works extensively with often conservative policy makers; he has found similar processes to be effective.

Outline/Description of Methodologies

Morning session

The morning will start with a round of introductions, intentions and creating a safe space for participants to explore new ways of learning together. Participants will be asked to write their question – that sticky problem that seems to be challenging them in their own institutions - onto a piece of paper and stick it in an envelope (with their name on the envelop). We then shuffle the envelopes and will be referring to them throughout the day.

We go through each of the main elements: fire, earth, air and water. We do an invocation of each, using variations of chanting, music and dance. In this we are honoring the elements. The leaders tell stories of the elements from their own contexts, helping the participants situate them and their own relationship to them differently. We seek their guidance.

At the end of each round of engaging with the elements, the participants are given another participant’s envelope. They are asked to consider the question in the envelope and respond to it, using the knowledge they gained from the elements. At the end of the whole morning session, the participants are invited to sit in silence with their own question and the feedback.

Break for lunch - Afternoon session

We start with a group dialogue about future knowledge institutions and the experience of the morning, including resistances that might have arisen. From this discussion, the facilitators design a simple ritual for the group based on the perceived needs of the group. If it is determined

that the group does not need or want an explicit ritual, we will not have one: the needs of the group are primary at this point in the workshop.

After the ritual, people are encouraged to sit in small groups and go back to their individual question. Each person has a chance to share where they are with their question and then to see what knowledge their small group has for the question, informed by the music, chanting, elements, rituals and silences throughout the day. By this point in the day, participants will be open to one another, enabling a deep community to form and possibly long lasting relationships to ensue. The workshop ends with a group conversation about epistemologies for future knowledge institutions.

The workshop will be recorded with the explicit permission of the participants; recordings and testimonials will be used to support us in writing an academic paper discussing the advantages and disadvantages of this approach.

Intended audience and ideal number of workshop participants: Max 24 people, minimum 12. People in positions of influence in their institutional context. People who are open minded and willing to try new things.

Expected outcomes of the TransAction workshop:

1. Participants get to engage in epistemologies and ontologies they most likely have little knowledge of or have not encountered side-by-side with their own intractable institutional challenges.
2. They come away with deeper solutions for their own unique context specific problems
3. They come away with a richer shared understanding of what might be necessary for future knowledge institutions that truly use multiple epistemologies
4. They come away with some concrete steps and tools they can use in their own action-based practices around institutional change and individual change

Space: large enough for a large group circle and small break out sections. Ideally easy access to the outside.

About the workshop facilitators:

Rev Sara Jolena Wolcott, M.Div., M.A., C.M.T., is the founding director of the ecotheology company, Sequoia Samanvaya. A graduate of Union Theological Seminary, the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, and the McKinnon School of Massage Therapy, she integrates spiritual and religious knowledge and somatic practices into the cultural transformation processes necessary for sustainable societies. She is an expert in the colonial and gendered roots of climate change and is an ongoing student of the spiritual/religious dimensions of sustainable transformations. She is known for her creative solutions, compassionate engagement and spontaneous genius.

Sara Jolena's email: sarajolena@sequoiasamanvaya.com
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Ramasubramanian, director of Samanvaya, hails from the southern Indian city of Chennai. He has been studying the deep roots of Indian society for the purpose of enabling his people's self-

realization for over 20 years. He draws inspiration from the ancient Vedic scriptures and his ongoing study of ancestral and traditional knowledge systems of governance, and Gandhian movements. The Sustainable Livelihood Institute, a unique partnership he forged between the Tamil Nadu government and the spiritual community of Auroville, has been highly successful. A sought after speaker on subversive practices to enable institutional transformation, he is passionate about future knowledge institutions. Ram's email: chief@samanvaya.com

Clarifications based on the queries that were sent by the Scientific Committee of the Conference –

- Consider more concretely how you will attract participants to your workshop, particularly local, mostly Spanish-speaking participants and community members, and how you will manage the language barriers;

We are fully aware that we need a translator. Our preference would be to bring our own however we do not yet know if funds will permit that. Therefore if it is possible to use a local translator, and to meet with the person the day before the workshop itself to help explain what we are doing and think through potential translation issues with that person, that would be good. Neither facilitator has much experience working in South America, and we will be doing pre-research into the Chile's culture, including reaching out to colleagues who have more experience than we do, to begin bridging some of the cultural translation issues that may arise. We will engage in some targeted online promotion may be undertaken by the facilitators and agencies on their behalf.

While your workshop proposal is one of the more innovative ones, it is also one of the riskier ones. It is therefore difficult to judge whether or not it will make any academic contributions and/or will lead to policy or practical outcomes. It is important to outline the expected outcomes of your workshop;

Academia has struggled to effectively answer its own questions of how to shift away from current, non-adaptive relationships in part because it has not given enough space for non-“academic” process which can then inform academic process. We will do pre-workshop and post-workshop documentation, video documentation and testimonials. These will be summarized into a practical academic paper that can be published in a journal that accepts both academic and practitioner articles. The policy outcome that is envisioned is the breaking down of the knowledge barriers in the transformation journey. The practical outcome of the workshop is the impact of the experience on individuals.

- It is only possible to light candles inside the room, please point out in the complementary form if you will need the organization committee to provide the candles. If so, please indicate the amount, size and color of the candles needed;
- Consider including examples of possible participants for the workshop in the complementary form.

Both the above are given in detail in the complementary form itself.