

Resilience of the Heart: From Transition to Transformation

Talk given to the UK Transition Conference, London May 2009

www.transitiontowns.org

www.transitionculture.org

Mary-Jayne Rust www.mjrust.net

Crisis has the potential to transform our hearts. This is a great gift. What might help us to be open hearted and resilient as we live through testing times? How do we build inner resilience, as well as resilient communities, so that we can endure and resolve conflict? What are the steps we need to take to find a different way of relating to ourselves, to each other and to the earth?

I want to start with gratitude - for being in this extraordinary gathering. How amazing that we have all given our week-ends to be part of mid-wife-ing the transition to a new way of living, to a new way of thinking and being.

So if you would like to close your eyes and just find a bit of silence in the midst of what has been, I am sure, a very busy conference.....and just contemplate:

Gratitude for loved ones – family and friends.

Gratitude for the beautiful world we live in – for the places in nature that nourish our hearts, for the food and shelter that is given to us by the earth....

I had one of those moments when I suddenly felt how extraordinary it was to be woken by the song of birds – who could have arranged anything more exquisite?

Gratitude for all those things which we might take for granted, which so many other people in the world don't have.....

Let's have a moments silence to give thanks to humans and the more-than-human world in whatever way suits you.

Resilience is much used word in Transition movement. We're familiar, by now, with what local resilience means: ensuring that we have the structures within our communities which can weather the storms of global crisis.

But what does “**resilience of the heart**” mean? Inner resilience is about our psychic capacity to face adversity and crisis. What a challenge it is to remain centred and calm, to be able to think, to remain loving, when in times of stress.

Crisis brings out the best and worst of human nature. It's very moving to see what we are capable of, isn't it. For example, how people will risk their own lives to help complete strangers in an extraordinarily open hearted way, often without giving it a second thought.

And then we see ghastly things happening in crisis, as in the New Orleans floods. Crisis breed fear and the possibility of being deprived; this can make us close down, and hang on tight to all we have got. We are beginning to see this happening.

So my question is: are there structures that we can put in place now, so that we can support the best sides of ourselves now?

And at the same time, how do we honour our pain, how do we accept and deal with the sides of ourselves that inevitably surface as the crisis quickens – such as fear, anger, selfishness, despair?

I would suggest that unless we are willing to acknowledge these more difficult aspects of our own nature, then our love and peace may become a kind of giving through gritted teeth and resentment.

I'll start by saying a few things about: **Supporting the best in human nature**

I would put first on my list: **Making sure we are sufficiently nourished.** Reacting out of fear so often happens when we are feeling deprived, run down, and that child voice can surface – “I'm doing all this work for the world, but who's looking after me?” It's important to appreciate and look after each other – but we also need to take responsibility for knowing what nourishes us and making sure this is a priority in our lives, so we don't get burnt out – a very common problem amongst activists.

Having a mentor and/or support group is a place where we can build intimate connections, celebrate our achievements, as well as admit our failings. Our community endeavours in this time of transition are new ground. This is both highly creative as well as deeply challenging, and we can only go forward in this together, learning from our mistakes together as we go. The Heart and soul group of Totnes has

put in place a mentoring scheme for all those at the centre of Transition Totnes. They have also initiated home groups, where those involved in the Transition Movement can support each other.

An image I find quite helpful is “**The eye of the storm**”. When everything around us gets chaotic, how do we access that still quiet place inside?

I find that places of sanctuary enable me to access the eye of the storm. I swim in a wild pond just half an hour from the centre of London most days. It always amazes me how every single time it centres me – I slow down, I breathe, I am in awe of the beauty of naturethe ducks, the sound of the trees..... stress falls away. I can see things with new eyes, in a different way. I get perspective again.

This is what I would call **ordinary transformation. It's heart opening**. That argument that was stressing me out earlier doesn't seem so irritating anymore....the mountain has reverted to a molehill.....and so on. Then I am much more able to listen to, and digest the situation at hand.

So what opens your heart? What is your daily practice which helps things to fall away? Here are a few thoughts:

Starting each day with **gratitude**.

Starting meetings with silence. This helps each of us become centred. Many communities have also discovered that a different kind of thinking happens through the silence, and this can give rise to different and unexpected solutions.

Listening. So often conflict arises because when we are stressed we haven't taken proper time to really listen to what is happening. There are so very many ways to listen: casual listening, empathetic listening, critical listening - or listening *in order to tell our story*, and so on. The value of simple, open, non-judgemental listening cannot be overestimated and it is a skill which can be learned.

Listening to all parts of the system: making sure that our working groups are **diverse**. Many times when I give lectures I am surrounded by white men. Where are the women speaking out? Perhaps we need to support women in doing this, so that their voices can be heard more clearly? Earlier today we watched the new Transition Film. One of the comments from the audience was that this film was about white, rural, middle-class people in transition. She felt she could not show this film to inner city audiences where she was living. How might we respond to this? It is a complex situation, but one which we must pay attention to if the transition movement is to remain healthy. For nature teaches us that **diversity** is the key to health.

Listening to all parts of the self. We all have a cocophony of voices speaking within, and, like any committee, the diverse range of internal voices need to be heard if a good decision is to be reached. It's easy to get stuck in our rational, intellectual minds in this culture, which can all too easily dismiss intuitive knowing, for example. New ways of seeing come from an *integration* of many different parts of the self.

Knowing our limits. Knowing how to protect ourselves; preventing burn out. I've got a cold right now. I've been doing too much! Listening to the body is crucial in helping us to find and know our limits.

Most of what I am saying here is probably obvious to you. But I wonder who manages to make these things happen. And I think what is interesting here is that although much of the time we know what is best for us, it is hard to actually put this into practice. Why is that?

Dealing with the difficult sides of ourselves

Being willing to face the darker sides of ourselves can be very moving if we are willing to listen. Joanna Macy, in *The Work that Reconnects*, talks about honouring our pain being an important stage in "The Great Turning".

I remember being at an event a few years ago where we were talking about our hopes and fears about the future. Quite a serious argument broke out about some people coming by car; how green were we all really? Later in the day a man withdrew from the group, and was talking about leaving, but no-one really knew why. I was asked to go and find out what was wrong. I found him in his room, huddled in a corner and reluctant to speak. We did get talking, and eventually he admitted: "I feel such hatred towards human beings", he said. "We're such a bad lot".

Immediately I felt a wave of compassion and I said, "I don't blame you – I sometimes feel like that too". "**Do** you?" he said, with a look of shock and surprise on his face. "Oh yes." I said. "I often feel intense irritation with people who seem so careless towards the earth"

He then started to talk about the other brooding thoughts that had been on his mind. "Sometimes I think it wouldn't be such a bad thing if all humans got wiped out". And then he went on to make a string of other 'thought' confessions! After about ½ hr his whole being had changed. He was energised, warm in his body, and no longer wanted to leave the group. We both felt moved to tears and a sense of deep connection.

He said "I feel completely different. It's a miracle. What's happened?!"

So let's just think about what happened.....

Here was someone who started having angry thoughts towards all humans as well as himself. He felt bad about the thought, ashamed, as though he was the only one who thought like this. He felt afraid of his thoughts, judging them as 'bad'. So he isolated himself from the group to the point where he felt compelled to go right away – in fear.

Then – we created a **safe space** was created in which he could admit to his thoughts and feelings.

Next, he was **listened to**, no interruptions. The power of active listening.

Next, his feelings were **accepted** (not recoiled from in horror!)

Finally, someone else said that they also felt like that at times– join the human race!

Within a simple act of listening, acceptance, compassion and identifying with another human, this man went from isolation, through shame, to a sense of deep connection. And it was beautiful for me too, to be able to make use of my skills in this great turning. He helped *my* heart to open.

This is another example of **ordinary transformation**.

Here in Britain we live in a culture that is very **stiff upper lip**. We are taught to hold feelings in, and that it's shameful to reveal what we feel. In fact success is about holding emotions in check.

If the Transition Movement is going to work long term, we have to recognise that sharing resources and working in groups is not easy. I find it hard enough to share a house with my partner, let alone sharing cars with my neighbours! As we all know, working together stirs up strong feelings, in different mixes in each of us. Just as listening is a skill which can be learned, emotional literacy, learning how to name and express our feelings, can be learned.

We are all challenged to experiment with:

- new ways of seeing from a Gaian perspective - understanding and knowing on a deep level that we are inside a living system
- new ways of working together that respects diversity, that is more inclusive.
- new ways of working through conflict, taking care of burn out and so on.
- designing clever structures to share, for example as www.streetcar.co.uk has done (this is a car club), and it works a treat.

The win-win of this is that **adversity itself has the potential to strengthen our resilience**. As a Buddhist teacher said recently, we go to the gym to keep our bodies in shape, and this is a painful process. Life is the gymnasium of the soul. We have to practice resilience of the heart and sometimes that's painful.

VISUALISATION

For the last five minutes, I'm inviting everyone to share in a short visualisation. So please close your eyes.....

We are probably going to be going through more bumpy times in near future....financial crisis, floods, heatwaves, collapses in parts of the system.

Imagine you are in a crisis...maybe one you have been in before, or a future scenario - what's it like?

Take some time to notice the detail of what's happening. What is the crisis about?

Notice where you are, who you are with, and in particularwhat are you feeling? Just check out your body for a moment – can you name your emotions and in which parts of your body are you feeling?

How are you coping with the situation? What are your inner resources?

What are you able to offer?

What would help you to bring out the best in yourself and in those around you?

Do you wish you had prepared yourself better for this situation? Take some time to see what you might have done.

How, if at all, does the crisis resolve itself?

Share your story with partner and/or small groups.....

Mary-Jayne Rust is an Ecopsychologist and Jungian Analyst. She lectures widely on how a psychological understanding can help us make the transition to sustainable living. Her work in the field of eating problems informs a wider interest in the challenges we face in giving up consumerism. She co-facilitates courses in the wilds of nature. Details of publications, lectures and courses are available on www.mjrust.net.

