

Psychology for a Change From Inertia to Inspiration for Action

Schumacher Lecture October 2005

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Over the last 15 years or so, I've become really intrigued by the question, **what is it that wakes people up to the ecological crisis that's looming large on our horizon?**

Something I've heard a lot lately is:

People are never going to change until the water is lapping at their doors. They're too complacent, too attached to their comfortable lifestyles.

But this isn't really true, is it?

People react in very diverse ways to oncoming disaster.

Imagine you're on the Titanic and the unthinkable has happened...you're in grave trouble.

Some people will act immediately, mobilise the lifeboats, and try to help as much as they can.

Others will hang around questioning whether the situation is really true.

Others will be waiting for instructions from the captain.

Others will be getting drunk in the bar, having sex in the cabins....

And some will remain paralysed.....and yet others will make a conscious decision to go down with the boat.....or play string quartets on deck.....and so on

And this is just what we see happening now.

Don't we live in really extraordinary times??

In the midst of this ghastly collective breakdown, we are also seeing a **collective awakening** - the tender new beginnings of an earth-centred way of living and being.

So I want to talk about the different ways in which people wake up, and tell some stories of change,

and think about might be happening in this process of change.

Three Elements in the Process of Change

In the process of thinking about this, three things strike me as central to awakening:

feeling, insight, and community

Feeling.....

People are often stirred to action because they **FEEL ANGRY** about something they really care about. Damage is being done and they want to help to put it right. Or they feel grief for another's plight.

Great loss or great love can stir **great change**.

FEELING strongly in our hearts can be a potent wake up call.

Insight.....

Other people suddenly **see things from a new perspective** – which can feel as amazing as seeing the milky way on a dark night.

Seeing our own culture in a new light, for example, can help us understand what is wrong and how to change.

Many people are inspired by spending time with **indigenous cultures**.

INSIGHT can inspire change.

Community.....

Others are inspired by meeting people on the same journey, or by the great visionaries of our time.

Finding COMMUNITY inspires and supports us to change.

I'll start with a story about **change in the forest**.

A few weeks ago, I went to Wales to run a course called '**Working with the Healing Power of Wild Places**'.

I work with a man who has spent many years in outdoor education, Dave Key.

And we run these groups because these kinds of experiences seem to inspire people to respect the earth.

Our venue was a magical place called Cae Mabon at the foot of Snowdon.
- where there's a collection of beautiful buildings, organically built, including a roundhouse.

It's a place to live more simply, to gather our collective memory from eons of story telling in such places, and a place to dream our future.

The heart of the 5 days is to spend a whole day, from dawn until dusk, in one spot alone in nature – a bit like an outdoor retreat. We prepare the group for this 'solo' time in the first two days, and afterwards we gather to tell the stories of their experiences.

This particular solo day was spent in ancient oak woodland in the pouring rain.

Here is an account from one woman:

My direct experience in the solo has strengthened my commitment to live sustainably. I have started getting the train to work instead of driving. It takes 2 and a half hours of my day instead of 50 minutes, but I can work on the train and practice mindfulness and daydream and that's really valuable. We're also getting a wind turbine to power our home and our recycling system is better. I have realised that being in wild places is a need for me, and not just an option.

You might well ask – what on earth is happening here? How does a day in the rain in the woods enable this change in someone?

So I asked this person to say more....

She said she felt the forest was like an **old friend**, waiting for her to reconnect. The forest had given her many different gifts on that day and she wanted to return the generosity. Now she could FEEL the connection between driving her car, carbon emissions and trees.

Beauty, silence, being still, listening – these things bring us home to our feelings, and to the simple wonder of the world around. They help us to reconnect – inside and outside.

DH Lawrence says in his poem ‘Escape’:

**When we get out of the glass bottles of our ego
and when we escape like squirrels turning in the
cages of our personality
and get into the forest again,
we shall shiver with cold and fright
but things will happen to us
so that we don't know ourselves.
Cool, unlying life will rush in,
and passion will make our bodies taut with power,
we shall stamp our feet with new power
and old things will fall down
we shall laugh, and institutions will curl up like
burnt paper**

Ritual in the wilds has been practised by different human groups for thousands of years.

It's a very powerful way of bringing us back in touch with our own nature. The word nature comes from 'Natus', to be born.

Returning to nature is returning to the source, to our place of origin, a sacred place of great tenderness as well as great passion and creativity.

Crossing bridges between ancient and modern, wild and urban, inside and outside, and more – isn't this where we find wisdom?

I wonder what would happen if we were to take our leaders for journeys in to the wilds?

The Wilderness Leadership School in South Africa has been doing just that for a number of years.

And there are many people around the world who take out different groups of people, knowing the potential this experience has for learning how to living lightly on the earth.

Going into the Wilds is not the only place in which change happens.

Change is complex.

Deep and long lasting change isn't usually just one significant event but rather **a series of shifts that begin to join together.**

I want to talk more about **feelings** in everyday life and how we become **disconnected** from our feelings, because I think it's this disconnection that stops people from feeling the **urgency** of our crisis.

Not long ago I was together with some other colleagues as we supervised each other's therapy work. The state of the planet was not the hottest topic in this group, so one day I asked them:

“If you really took on board the crisis that faces us, how would this affect what you say as a therapist?”

Very quickly the subject was changed and they talked about something else. They couldn't remember the question I had asked. So I repeated it, and still they changed the subject. This time someone else intervened - and after it had happened for a third time, everyone agreed something rather strange was happening.

*One person said in rather a quiet voice that it was **simply unbearable to think of the terrors of the future when she had young children** – what would happen to them? Then we noticed that everyone in the group had young children except for me.*

This is a good example of what we call “splitting” - **when something becomes too traumatic to think about it becomes “split off”** from our feeling self.

My colleagues were all aware of the dangers we face in our world, but because they can't allow themselves to **FEEL the situation**, the urgency is lost.

When something is really traumatic, we might deny that it is true or put it out of our conscious minds completely.

Splitting is something that we all experience every day.

It's what **protects us** from an **overwhelming amount** of pain in the world. But it's a problem when we become **NUMB** to the pain we **NEED** to feel.

When buying meat from shops all **neatly packaged**, people are vaguely aware that this comes from an animal who might have been raised in a **factory farm** and/or killed in an inhumane way.

But because our foods are so **separated from their origins**, it's hard to piece together information with **FEELING**.

How do we bring that feeling back?

Anything that can help us to **identify** with the plight of the other.

E.g. a few documentaries have been quite successful on this front, revealing the slave lives of **cocoa pickers**, or the inhumane hours of **sewing machinists in the Far East for Nike**.

What would happen in our world of consumerism if we became more aware of the “**stories of origin**” of everything we buy?

What if we had a website that anyone could enter to find out the stories behind any product?

Images, as well as stories, can help us to **identify with the pain of others**.

A beautiful image by **Greenpeace** of a foetus with it's arms outstretched, has the words underneath: **CONSUMING CHEMICALS**,

This image makes us **FEEL** how chemicals enter us at the **earliest stage of life**.

Innuited mothers have been advised not to breastfeed their children because of the high levels of **PCBs in their breastmilk**.

Images can be multi-layered. I think this image also speaks about **contaminated of the sacred**.

Splitting is what enables people to divide human groups into those who are respected, and those who are not. This process enabled slavery and apartheid and the holocaust to happen. We split and then we project the pieces of ourselves that we don't want to own onto the disrespected other.

We see this within our relationship to animals also. **Dogs, cats and horses**, are like members of our families. And why not?

But then we treat other animals with no feeling.

Jane Goodall Story

*I was acutely reminded of this when I heard Jane Goodall speak a few years ago. **She is famous for her tireless work with chimpanzees**. She told a most moving story about one of her regular visits to see chimps being used in medical research. There she met Billy, a chimp living in a cage measuring **5'x 5'**, with no light, and simply a car tyre. Billy had lived in this cage for **ten years**.*

When she met his gaze she saw how happy he was that someone had relieved the grinding monotony of the day, for the only time he had any

stimulation was when he was taken out was to have liver biopsies or other tests.

Tears welled up in her eyes and started to trickle down her face at the sight of this animal so deprived of his freedom and dignity.

Billy then reached out through the bars and caught the tear on her cheek, while he carried on grooming her wrist.

How do you **FEEL** when you hear this story?

Notice where the feelings are in your body.

If this makes you want to cry, this is a sign that you are well connected to the pain of others in our world.

When I heard Jane Goodall tell this story, I witnessed **300 people** getting out their tissues.

Our pain for the world is SO close to the surface - this is how we know, through our bodies, that we are all interconnected.

FEELING WITH is **com-passion**.

Having strong feelings can be quite overwhelming and it's understandable to want to shut down – **it's painful**.

When I hear this story I feel so **ANGRY** that this is allowed to happen – feeling strong rage can be frightening.

I also **feel guilty** and I feel a **sense of shame** about being human.....

'Feeling with' is tricky when we live in a society which is rather stiff-upper-lip! This is especially true of middle class Britain – where “negative” feelings are not to be shown.

Feelings are wake up calls. They are our **raw materials** for taking action.

If we **shut off from them**, we lose our power.

But they need to be digested before being an effective tool.

We need **safe places** in which we can hear each others' feelings for the world. This empowers people.

Splitting also enables people to divide their public and private selves.

Story of public and private selves

*Recently a good friend of mine told me that she had just spent a week-end together with the **head of a large multi-national corporation**.*

*This man confided in her that he was suffering from **sleepless nights** because the company was doing major works in **south-east Asia**.*

*He had recently visited and seen the **devastating effects** the work was having on local peoples.*

***Experiencing their trauma first hand** had enabled him to **FEEL** what was happening – very different from reading about it from afar.*

*Yet this man, like so many other people in positions of power in this world, does not admit to his **private feelings** in public. Probably he is too afraid of losing his job and/or his wealth and his position of power.*

***The good news** is that he **can feel**, his heart is telling him there is something wrong, and that he can **confess** to his feelings to my friend.*

How can a person like this start to use his heart to guide his rational working self?

- **Greenpeace** has recently been in the news for taking leaders from the business world out the Amazon to **experience** first hand what is happening in the rainforest.
- How about creating **safe, private places** for people (like this man) to talk about how they feel, one-to-one and in groups. There is huge power in finding out you are not alone. This is the start of making bridges between the heart and the rational mind.

Eventually maybe some heart will come into company law and prevent companies from wreaking such devastation on land and peoples.

It's terrifying watch the destructive power of the rational mind when it's split off from the heart.

Jeannette Armstrong from the Okanagan peoples of British Columbia tells us:

.....We use a term that translates as “directed by the ignited spark” to refer to analytical thought. We know ...that unless we always join this capacity to the heart-self, its power can be a destructive force both with respect to ourselves and to the larger selves that surround us. A fire that is not controlled can destroy. (Keepers of the Earth, in T. Roszak, ‘Ecopsychology’ 1994)

I’m convinced that we need a more imaginative way to reach the heart. While rational debate is needed in this debate over lifestyle change, my sense is that we need some off beat, leap of genius to help us make a leap into collective change.

For example, a colleague of mine, Zita Cox, facilitates “**Environmental Constellations**”. A participant is invited to describe a burning issue. Members of the group are chosen to represent aspects of this issue, human and non-human. With the help of the facilitator, participants speak from their **bodies**. This helps everyone to listen to, and identify with, different aspects of the natural world – and it releases them from left brain debate.

Another example is called the **social dreaming matrix**, something that is used in organisations quite a lot. Participants meet for a certain length of time in order to share their dreams. Everyone is invited to say whatever comes to mind in relation to the dreams. But the dreams are not interpreted or understood on a personal level. Rather, they are thought of as images offered to the collective, to illuminate what might be happening both within the organisation, and/or the wider collective.

Jeannette Armstrong, from the Okanagan peoples in British Columbia, says: *Our word for body literally means ‘the land-dreaming capacity’ (Ibid)*

The land dreams through us.

Our dreams can point to very surprising ways forward, ways that the rational mind can’t get to!

Joanna Macy and John Seed are two activists who have devised many experiential exercises to help people reconnect to what is going on in our world on a feeling level.

For example - Imagine you are a **future being**, post ecological crisis, looking back on year 2005.....
 what do you see about your life
 what you are doing?
 What really matters?
 What is your contribution?.....and so on.

(Many of these are in Joanna Macy's Book: Coming Back to Life)

Summary:

So, just to bring together some of the things I have been saying about FEELING.

I have been talking about different experiences that **wake people up** to the damage humans do to our precious web of life:

*****Spending time in the wilds** is one way – this rekindles our love for the other-than-human world, and this generates a natural desire to look after it.

***Another way is when we can **identify with others, human and non-human who are in pain** and this also impels us to act to help.

“Feeling with” reconnects us to the world and stirs people to action.

I have also talked about ways in which this **feeling self** can begin to reconnect with **the rational mind**.

2) INSIGHT

Now I want to talk about insight, about how we cut through the layers and **SEE** things from a fresh perspective.

In the early 1990s I spent some time in Ladakh, on the western edge of the Himalayas. Although things there are changing quite rapidly, it is still possible to get a sense of what it might be like to live within an intact indigenous culture.

I'm not suggesting that everything is perfect in a place like this. Nor am I suggesting that we could ever return to this lifestyle (although post oil who knows....)

But we can be reminded of what we have lost in our search for supposed progress.

A number of things struck me during my stay there.

One of the first things I felt was an amazing sense safety, of being able to trust people. I could go up to anyone, have deep eye contact, and know that they would help if I needed it.

I noticed how this sense of safety changed in my body when I returned home to London. It made me realize how much we need to shield ourselves, in our bodies, especially living in a big cities. We protect ourselves on a daily level from painful news, from noise, pollution, and from danger.

There was also a sense of incredible joy amongst peoples who were classified as some of the poorest in the world.

In every house there was a room devoted to prayer. And a room devoted to composting shit. And there is very little difference between rich and poor. Everyone has a place to live and has access to beauty all around.

You can see children play freely in the fields all day, knowing that no harm would come to them. Animals are free to roam and miraculously they return to their stables and wait outside in the evenings.

This reminds us that we have **LOST** many of our freedoms, despite the line that we live in a free society. Our current definition of freedom seems to be

that we are free to do what we like, including to pollute and consume and damage others in the process.

A good new definition I heard the other day from an 18yr old young woman was:

'Freedom is having choice without harming others'.

So simple yet very compelling.

Eating problems and weight issues simply do not exist. The older women have dignity and pride in them selves and their bodies, whereas the younger generation are less able to make eye contact; they hold their bodies in a different way. Their sense of dignity has palpably changed.

Ladakhi life challenges the notion that human nature is greedy at core – they have lived like this for hundreds of years. Human nature is many things, and is deeply affected by the context we are brought up in.

All the women with eating problems that I have worked with over the years have taught me that behind that yawning greed is a **starving soul** – and when your soul is starving you get angry.

Bingeing on pornography, food, drink, drugs, consumer goods are all a misplaced search for **nourishment of the soul**.

Addictions are not found in Ladakh because their **“soul food” is found in their everyday lives**.

Inspiration from others cultures can inspire us to think outside the box. For example, Bhutan has come up the idea of Gross National Happiness. Instead of looking to Gross National Product as an indicator of success, we measure how people are **FEELING**.

The **New Economics Foundation** in London is an organization that has been finding different indicators for measuring our success as a culture. What they show is that when material wealth increases beyond a certain level, so do psychological problems.

I'm sure many of you are familiar with all the debates around freedom, progress, and growth.

What's interesting to me as a therapist is that - just as we have myths that drive us to repeat destructive patterns on a personal level, that we are barely conscious of, we also have myths that drive us to be destructive as a culture.

How many times do you hear people defending our lifestyles saying, **“Oh well, at least we live in a free society”**, or **“at least we don't live in the dark ages anymore”**.

The myth of progress and the myth of freedom are very powerful in persuading people of the success of consumerism.

Counting the costs of our lifestyles, and making them understandable to people, is tricky. When things have become so disconnected, it's hard to show what is due to what.

On the reverse side, living sustainably has become associated with deprivation – or worse, bean-eating, goody two-shoes killjoys.

How do we get these debates more into the lives of ordinary people? I wonder what whether some great children's stories or films on these themes would touch the collective psyche in a different kind of way.

A good book to read on this, if you haven't already, is **Ancient Futures....Helena Norberg-Hodge**. It's full of stories and easy to read.

3) Community

The third thing I want to speak about is **COMMUNITY**

I believe that the majority of people DO care, and do want to make changes. But they are hampered by unsatisfying jobs which pay their enormous mortgages, and a thousand distractions in their small amount of leisure time. Change takes time and people fear that they will simply be deprived in the process.

My sense is that many people need bridges to help them cross between consumer lifestyles and living lightly on the earth. It's vital that we have triggers for inspiration, like Findhorn, the Centre for Alternative Technology, Schumacher College, and like the Eden Project. The next step is grounding that inspiration in all the details of our lives.

Another story:

*This is a story of a friend who I met some time ago. He was working for a large corporation in financial services. He was very **intellectually stimulated** by his job, the money was good, but he wasn't at all **satisfied in his heart**.*

*He was **frightened of earning less**, as he had **two children** to support, but as he became **more miserable** in his work, he knew he had to make a change.*

*One afternoon, we played with '**visioning**'.*

I asked him to write down on a large piece of paper all things he might like to do. Nothing must be censored at this stage.

*The idea was to play with **outrageous and crazy ideas**, as well as sensible ones, and to sketch out his absolutely dream work situation.*

He spoke of several ideas, and then his eyes filled with tears as he spoke about the importance of honesty, and his dream of getting companies to tell the truth in their reports about what they are doing. This wasn't the whole solution, he said, but an important start, and something that he could offer to the world.

Several years on, and several stages of change along the way, he is now working free lance with companies mainly on reporting issues.

***Transparency** is his key issue.*

He is SO much happier now. This is not only important for the health of the world, it's important for his own his health, for his heart, for his own integrity.

Even better than that, the children have a father who is spending his life doing what he believes in.

Coming into line with our own integrity, our sense of authenticity also has a wonderful ripple effect on people around us.

The theologian Frederick Buechner says;

“Our calling is the place where your deepest gladness and the world’s deepest hunger will meet.”

When we dare to dream, uncensored, it is surprising what can emerge.

How we cross that **gulf between dreams and making those dreams happen** may take many years. I think that finding support within our local community is vital in this process.

Ecopsychology....

I joined an Ecopsychology group to help me cross the bridge between regular psychotherapy and a therapy practice which would make the connections between the personal and the bigger picture.

The psychotherapy world has been hugely effective with enabling people to feel, and to digest their feelings. At it's best, it's a very powerful tool to help people get rid of internal blocks which prevent them from doing what they need to in the world.

At it's worst it can be cut-off from our oncoming ecological crisis.

However, everyone coming into therapy is aware of the crisis we are heading into on some level. The state of the planet is not some trauma way out there – it is right on our doorstep in the food we eat, the air we breathe, our water, our landscapes.....so of course it must come into our bodies, into our illnesses, into our earliest relationships, into our psyches and into our dreams.

I'll just give you a couple of examples here...

Some therapists are recognising the **great healing potential of having sessions outdoors**, on allotments. The Natural Growth Project is part of the Medical Foundation for Victims of Torture in North London.

They use allotments as their location for therapy sessions with asylum seekers and refugees. These people who are so very **badly hurt by other humans**, as well as being dislocated from their homes and country, often find it easier to connect to nature first, before daring to risk human relationships again.

Tending allotments is community building, in the widest sense, and a perfect seedbed for therapeutic dialogue. Digging the soil, composting, nurturing plants and weeding provide wonderful metaphors for nursing the human soul.

Book: Jenny Grut, Healing Fields.

And what about dreams:

Consider the following dream, which is taken from Jung's autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*:

October 1913

I saw a monstrous flood covering all the northern and low-lying lands between the North Sea and the Alps.....I realised that a frightful catastrophe was in progress. I saw the mighty yellow waves, the floating rubble of civilisation, and the drowned bodies of uncounted thousands. Then the whole sea turned to blood.

At this time, Jung had no idea of the war ahead. He interpreted this as his own psychosis. Dreams like this can be multi-layered. They can reflect very personal aspects of ourselves as well as telling us about the larger situation as a whole.

Stories are like this also. Returning to the story of Billy the chimp, it's not only about the reality of the situation, and the feelings that we have about a chimp being locked in a cage. It's also about how we lock up the wild creature in ourselves, and treat this beautiful, instinctual, sensual, intuitive being like an object. The rational mind has become the keeper of this being, to keep it under control.

Local Groups

As I discovered, local groups can really help **empower people** in making changes in their lives.

Listening to other peoples' stories helps us to piece things together, to make sense of how consumer culture affects the tiny details of our lives - at home, at work, in our relationships, our illnesses.... and how we can respond to this.

They make the bridge between global and local.

Groups are places we can **pool our knowledge** on making the practical changes of **reducing our footprints**.

Repairing things in this way, creating new lifestyles doesn't sap energy, it releases energy.

Groups are also places to share our wildest dreams for we might do at this time of crisis on the planet.

Everybody has a gift to offer at this time, whether it be **growing your own food**, to converting that **ridiculous millennium dome** into some kind of an education centre about what's happening to us all.

I'm sure the Eden project started as a wild dream....

Living lightly on the earth is not **JUST** about **making a better future**.

It's about authenticity, integrity and respect for our whole precious web of life in the here and now. It's absolutely just as much about helping ourselves as it is about helping the earth.

Lila Watson, aboriginal activist, says:

If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time.

If you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.

ENDING

I want to end with a quote from Joanna Macy - ecophilosopher, Buddhist scholar and activist.

After listening to this quote, I'd like to invite you to just sit quietly for 3 minutes to have a chance to digest some of what you have heard.

The process of being with someone who's dying and the process of attending a birth have many features in common. We can only be grateful for this moment, this breath, this incredible capacity to direct our attention.

Whatever happens, this can be a moment of unparalleled awakening. We have a sense of what it means for an individual to wake up. For the collective to awaken, we cannot even imagine what it will be like.

The evolutionary pressure on us now, which can feel so ghastly, pushes us toward this awakening.

Life-forms have gone through periods when it must have seemed totally hopeless. For example, when oxygen was a poison, who could have imagined that life would develop the breathing apparatus to use it?

..... I don't think we've been given any absolute guarantee that conscious life on Earth will continue. It might. It might not. In either case, this is a most extraordinary and beautiful moment. Because in this moment we can make a choice for loving life and taking care of each other. Right up to the end, we can make that choice, and that's glorious. So we don't need to ask, "Will it go on forever?" This moment is forever. In this moment I can honor the ancestors, honor the future beings, honor all the beautiful work we are doing. And there's no end to that.

Find a partner and exchange some things about what has caught your attention in what I have been saying.