

Themes: reflections for our work on the commons.

These themes are offered in the spirit of our ongoing laboratory for testing the idea/lens of the commons as we work with organizations and gatherings of activists and individuals who are organizing or working within the non-profit sector. The idea of our upcoming seminar is to have time to hear about each other's work, read ahead of time any offerings we see as important to our discussion, interpret those ideas together, workshop some of our approaches in the field, and finally to unite our thinking and conclusions. We hope to have at the end of our time together a clearer path for how to use our time and resources in the coming months. Participants include Kim Klein and Carolyn McAndrews from the Building Movement Project, Chuck Collins, IPS and Extreme Inequality Working Group, Harriet Barlow, Ana Micka, Julie Ristau, Kathleen Maloney, Rachel Breen from OTC and Alexa Bradley and Dave Mann from Grassroots Policy Project.

First, from our notes, some thoughts about popular education:

- Popular education is intended to develop critical consciousness, to enable regular people to uncover deeper truths and arrive at new understandings through shared reflection and analysis.
- In our experience for people to truly "get" the commons, we need to break through the constraints of what they think they know, and re/assemble different or buried aspects of other knowledge
- Our workshops have been intended to principally engage organizers and activists. The commons is at best an unfamiliar concept, at worst, at odds with much of the current thinking in organizing circles. In order to engage people in the power of the idea we need to interrupt habitual thought and bring them into new terrain creatively.

The times—our current experience and where that puts us with the commons agenda

Everyone is talking about change or at least desire for change. Stunningly in the face of some of the worst news possible on planetary health, economic stability, peace and human rights, people, rather than plunging into despair, are expressing an eagerness and willingness to seek new and bold solutions. Even polling data, usually a bad place to look for anything hopeful and exciting, suggests that people are "craving" bold solutions to the level of problems they see. Some describe the Obama phenomena as having given permission to peoples hopes, a collective unleashing of desire. It is all very exciting especially after years, decades, of depressing and stale politics and a demoralized sense of what the future held.

Now with the collapse of the American, and perhaps global, credit

markets the mood has turned toward anxiety and fear.

Some recent observations from Dave, Julie, Alexa's work

- The entry points today for groups are different than even a year ago.
- We are hearing and seeing a yearning for transformation.
- We used to start with activities that got them to see that what they were doing was not enough, we wanted to push them to a different level of aspiration and awareness; to break open yearning/ hunger. We looked for triggers in the worldview work that would promote yearning.
- Now yearning is the entry point.
- Commons can be a way to activate yearning. A way to think about what we are yearning for. To see ourselves with others, to tear down the fences where the other resides, to start connecting the dots?
- "Who is the we in the "work of the we"? The commons as a reconciling idea.

Some questions may be:

What are we witnessing? How does it impact us overall?

How does the current political, social and emotional American backdrop set the stage for our discussions about catalyzing a commons-based movement?

How does the landscape affect entry points in our workshops?

Transformation in organizations; transformative agendas

We have noted the lack of clarity about what fundamental change, the kind people were hungry for, might include. We wrote in the summer and it seems just as true now: "the organizations, institutions and decision makers we would first think of looking to for ideas and leadership, seem largely fettered by the paradigms of these past decades. Their calibrations and calculations about what is possible or even permissible to seek to change, how change comes about, who is part of the change, what needs to be taken into consideration, etc are all rooted in a set of prior dynamics and understandings. These same organizations and leaders feel the excitement of the moment but struggle to make sense of it or to respond to it."

This relates to the commons as it is an idea, a framework, a paradigm, an approach which makes sense only in a different kind of politics. It makes sense if we think about change differently –it is as much about how we relate to one another and our shared resources as it is about

concrete outcomes; power differently – it suggests active stewardship and participation more than a list of demands; approach differently – we need to see ourselves as creative, participating, engaged not petitioners, protesters, outsiders to the decisions.

An excerpt from *Why We need New Ways of Thinking*, Barry Boyce, Shambala Sun, 2008: “There are a couple of areas where I sometimes despair about our capacity to deal with what lies ahead,” Homer-Dixon told me. “One is our cognitive characteristics and the other is the self-reinforcing nature of our economic system.

When Homer-Dixon speaks of our 'cognitive characteristics,' he refers to the fact that we adapt easily to small-scale, incremental change. It's what makes it possible to get up in the morning and not feel we're in a strange new world. It's part of our survival apparatus. And yet, Homer-Dixon says, this very capacity is “a real handicap when it comes to dealing with slow-creep problems. We just don't see the change, and the thing about slow-creep problems is they may be slow-creep for a while, but then all of a sudden there's a non-linear shift and we find ourselves in a crisis.”

Our economic habits link up with every other problem we face, since at bottom economics is about how we choose to use the resources of the planet—in what ways, in what proportion, and at what rates. 'We simply don't have a vision of an alternative economic system that isn't oriented toward unending material growth,' Homer-Dixon says. 'Until we have an alternative vision, or theory, we won't give up the one we have.' Rather than a mere study of stock markets and gross national products, real economics is the interface between human beings and the world all around. And we are evermore out of touch with that world.”

Questions may include:

We have found a depth of relationship is necessary to catalyze new practices and thinking. How do we work within the tension of wanting to get to scale, breadth”

Others questions--???

The continuing discussion about the power of story telling in commons paradigm shifting.

Food for thought: In Kim's work and OTC/GPP we have explored the role of situational and generational stories and the power they have in ability to imagine. We have discussed and experimented with the relationship such stories have to memory, naming and tapping imagination. Included in our readings are examples of stories that have been used in various settings. Kim Klein's report talked how people see

the commons as enclosed as based on their formative stories; Beth Zemsky and Dave talked about story telling in their article; Julie and Alexa recently captured the stories they heard while visiting a colleague in SE MN.

Questions may include:

How do stories get made into meaning? How do we link the stories? Is the commons a way of linking stories? How can the commons help to illustrate the solution/s to a set of problems.

How do we help people name the links between experiences and stories? How important is it that we use the word "commons" to help name that link?

Regarding language and the commons word

We find the quote from Kim Klein's report provocative:
"The notion of "the commons" is not sufficiently interesting for most of the people I worked with over the past year for them to consider devoting any time to it. The fact that the "commons" has multiple meanings is confusing, and that it is an old word makes the concept seem out of date".

The commons is an historical word, the commons exist, it is more than a lens or a frame. Yet at the heart of it, the word "commons" may not immediately connect or ignite; it does not instantly conjure a new glimpse of a new reality for many.

Questions may be:

What have we learned about using the word commons?

What is the role of language in this aspect of our work?

Naming is assigning meaning. It helps us move to interpretation which in turn is central to critical consciousness. If the commons is a reconciling paradigm which allows disparate pieces to be linked in meaning, what is the role of language as it relates to linkage and attaching one thing to another?

"Okay, I get it, what can we do?" How do we progress if we want to help catalyze and accelerate a commons based movement? What kind of naming is necessary?

This was a theme of Kim Klein's report, and is squarely coming back to us in our over all OTC work.

Some reflections on Transformation/ Paradigm Shift/ Movement Times

- Organizations are not movements
- Policy is not a movement, does not make a movement
- Movement is not mechanical (poetic and romantic)
- Transformation both comes out of and inspires a movement

Could we be seeking ways to transform to a *commons based society*?
Could that be the basis for a movement, whereas commons as a sector or as “entities” does not—does this phrase demonstrate more adequately a paradigm that guides and shapes how to get there? “These many efforts give us a glimpse of a different society,” *Commons Rising*

This way of thinking about commons work may get us past definitions and debate about what is and isn't a commons. Like a fractal, any small way that something is commons based, it suggests and participates in a larger commons reality. You need a practice to be a paradigm – this offers a way to address that, what we can do that brings us toward a commons based society?

We could use the commons based society to juxtapose with a market based society. Perhaps this discussion forces us to squarely land on how we view the commons as a useful tool, concept, paradigm, worldview. We are positing that whatever we do glimpse as a new paradigm/reality has at the heart of it the principles the commons espouses--linked fate, mutuality, humanness, we, connection, in this together, benefiting all.

If we really open ourselves to the idea of a commons-based society we will also be opening ourselves to the reality that we are living lives of desperation in one sense. And that we are beginning to feel the heat. So pain. The emotional plane is at the center of the paradigm shifting experience.

Questions may be:

How do you give people clarity about the choices involved in creating a more commons based world?

How do you create “adherents” of a movement?

What kinds of actions could give the paradigm a street life?