LEADERSHIP PRACTICES FOR THRIVABILITY IN COMPLEX SOCIAL SYSTEMS: THREE STORIES

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ABSTRACT

The authors compare three collaborative action research projects aimed at generative systems change. The goal of the article is to reflect on the the dialogic methodologies they employed, the impacts and outcomes experienced by the participants' as leaders and innovators of systemic change, and the evolution of the authors' own practices as facilitators and catalysts of change.

Wilson reflects on a three-year action research project in peri-urban Mexico on sustainable community development. Focusing on the emergent edge of the evolving system of local-state relationships, she recounts the changing attitudes, emotions, and behaviors of the public sector professionals and local community leaders engaged in the project. Wilson reflects on the sense of vulnerability and insecurity raised by the dialogic methodology she used, and the impact on her own practice and sense of self in the presence of these tensions.

Bush explores a year of engagement within an urban system in Asheville NC: public housing. Originally intending to engage in collaborative research, he instead engaged in an ethnography following public housing's resident leadership's efforts at self-organizing governance. Offering propositions about leadership for resilience in urban systems, he reflects on the challenges to and evolution of self-awareness for individuals, organizations, systems, and himself as a practitioner-researcher.

Walsh reflects on her praxis in regenerative development from 2006 to 2015 in the context of environmental gentrification in a neighborhood in Austin, Texas. To become an instrumentof critical, creative, and collaborative change, she developed and fostered regenerative dialogue for green home repair and a community food forest. Walsh reflects on the ways this approach supported her and her neighbors in harnessing the generative potential of social conflict and vulnerability.

The comparative analysis of the three stories concludes with propositions for leadership practices that foster thrivability in complex social systems.

Keywords: Distributed leadership, generative dialogue, thrivability, regenerative design, complex social systems, situated spiritual practice

INTRODUCTION

In a world increasingly characterized by uncertainty, social inequality, and ecological degradation, how can action researchers engage in ways that support regenerative systems change in the living systems of which they are part? How can the inhabitants of living

systems co-create experiences and conditions of thrivability? These questions animated the reflective practice of the authors of this paper as they each engaged in collaborative action research projects in three different, socially complex and contested contexts. This paper explores the dialogic methodologies they employed, the impacts and outcomes experienced by the participants as leaders and innovators of systemic change, and the evolution of the authors' own practices as facilitators and catalysts of change. The emphasis on personal reflective practice in this paper is consistent with the emergent discourse on "thrivability," which embraces a "spirituality that re-instills a sense of the sacred in the universe" and calls for integrating multiple systems perspectives in the process of making meaning and initiating transformational change (Laszlo, 2014). As Laszlo (2014) has asserted, "By keeping the four levels of systemic thrivability—the intra-personal, the interpersonal, the trans-species, and the trans-generational—present in our thoughts and perceptions throughout our individual and collective meaning making efforts, we will be able to create a shared sense of meaningfulness, and this will further emerge the conditions of hyperconnectivity and flow." This is easier said than done. We find that while practices for thrivability are in many ways transferable, they are also inherently contextual and experiential. As such, we offer three personal, contextual stories of praxis from which we offer four propositions that may be useful to others in cultivating situated leadership practices for thrivability.

WILSON'S STORY: EMANCIPATORY PRACTICE IN PERI-URBAN MEXICO
Setting the Stage

Clinging to the edges of deep ravines or clustered near abandoned landfills on the peri-urban fringe of the sprawling Mexico City conurbation, the self-built homes of some 15,000 settlers, mostly refugees from gentrification in Mexico City, comprise the so-called 'irregular' communities of El Tráfico and Llano Grande. With neither clear title nor basic water and wastewater services, the occupants have made these contested landscapes home over the last ten to twenty years, with more arrivals every year.

The local watershed commission, a decentralized body of the federal water commission, CONAGUA, treated such communities as a problem. It was not their illegality, i.e. the lack of proper land titles, that was the problem, but rather the fact that they were the primary source of the untreated wastewater and trash entering the streams and killing the manmade jewel of the region, the Presa Guadalupe Lake. But try as they did, the watershed commissioners' policies, programs, regulations, community trainings, and environmental awareness campaigns did nothing to diminish the flow of garbage and untreated waste from the informal settlements.

In 2013 the director of the watershed commission sensed that a new approach to dealing with the informal settlements was needed. She invited me to introduce a collaborative and participatory form of engagement with the communities, using participatory action research (PAR). Accompanied by my students and teaching assistant in Community and Regional Planning at the University of Texas, I would facilitate a field-based workshop with local government professionals and educators involved in sustainable development in

the Presa Guadalupe watershed. We would engage with two of the informal communities where the leaders had invited us--El Tráfico and Llano Grande.

That two-week workshop has developed into an ongoing program of participatory sustainable development led by a local university and the watershed commission, with annual visits from my students and me. The two communities can now boast of greater agency and participatory capacity, as well as visible strides in the productive reuse of materials once destined for the creeks and ravines. The story I wish to tell from these experiences, however, deals with the transformation of the practitioners themselves in our first workshop: how the twenty four sustainable development professionals when shorn of their customary titles, positions, and roles could face their vulnerability and build respectful, trusting, and horizontal relationships of collaboration and creativity with community residents and fellow teammates. The rocky road to transformation also left me with some valuable self-reflection about my own blind spots, the implications for my practice of participatory action research (PAR), and the meaning of emancipatory practice.

Leadership and Performance Stories

The 24 Mexican professionals invited by the watershed commission had expected another top down seminar given by an outside sustainability expert, along with a few excursions to nearby communities. What they got was an intense immersion in participatory action research aimed at identifying in tandem with the community the emergent edge of change using rapid cycles of action and reflection. The professionals would be the facilitators and collaborators, not the purveyors of answers or directors of projects. Their individual expertise would come in only if and when needed to add value to the collective efforts. There was no pre-defined game plan, no concrete objective, no performance evaluation criteria, and no designated team leader!

Insecurity welled up in the Mexican professionals from Day 1. The tension crescendoed on Day 2, especially when their first engagement with the communities did not go as the teams had planned, and discord broke out over how to respond. By Day 3 the tension had become overbearing for some of them.   Different people tried to step into authority roles in their groups, generating more friction and tension. The last straw seemed to be embarrassment—they thought they looked unprepared and foolish in the eyes of the community residents and leaders.

At first the tension seemed productive to me—alive and generative. As a practitioner of PAR, I know that tension is a valuable motivator, and a great foil for questioning one's own assumptions, opinions, and judgments. In fact, the art of holding tension is a major skill of the PAR practitioner: to be comfortable with X and Not X at the same time, knowing that a higher synthesis is already emergent, to not rush to relieve or resolve tension but rather to trust in process.   In fact, the moment that tension peaks and an impasse is reached can be the moment of presencing (Scharmer 2009) – the creative reframing that opens the way to a new synthesis, the emergent edge, and generative action.

Well, I was told, this tension was unbearable, and I needed to do something. They wanted me to resolve the tension by doing what they were accustomed to--to have me step into the

authority role and tell them just what to do. I was tempted to become the savior, play the hero role, wield the authority they longed for, and resolve the tensions by laying out the answers. Yet I knew that doing so would undercut the very takeaways I hoped for them to experience.

At the same time I suspected that I had already failed at something really important: I had not created a safe enough container to hold the tension in the group—a space where people know they are loved and cared for, despite all difficulties. In my desire not to control I had appeared aloof. I had not built a heart space of caring that could hold the insecurity and vulnerability when frustration was high.

Rather than claiming the authority role, I chose to bring the uncertainty out into the open for collective reflection. Through dialogic inquiry, we examined the two teams' unfolding experiences in order to "become uncertain together" (Philippson, 2009 p. 29). The tension became held collectively, rather than individually. But the real turning point happened after lunch on the fourth day. Inspired by social presencing theater and theater of the oppressed, I asked each team to come up with a skit in which they would portray—literally, act out—their experience in the field for the other team to see.

The participatory theater became the alchemical agent of transformation through levity and perspective. By creating a skit about their experience, they learned what each other saw as the difficulties, challenges, and also successes. They realized they weren't alone. It got people to see themselves with perspective, and thereby reflect on their own experience as others might see it. It let them see their own roles in creating the difficulties and successes, individually and as a group. It gave them compassion for each other's experience. It allowed each other to step outside of themselves, see the larger picture, and recognize the folly of their group's collective dissonance. Most important, they got to laugh about it! Doing the skit got people out of their heads and working together. It allowed them to act foolish in front of their peers in a field of safety. They got to see that it was OK when others made 'fools' of themselves. By the end of the skits the tension in the room had melted—vanished! Afterwards the teams appeared galvanized, productive, and happy.

Reflections on Performance Stories

By the end of the two weeks many of the professionals expressed their amazement at how much they had been able to accomplish, from bridging a long standing community divide and collaboratively designing an ecological park and playground in one case, to fostering a women's initiative to transform plastic bags and discarded tires into productive reusable resources in another case.   For some of the professionals the most important dividend was earning the trust and respect of the two communities where we worked, something they had not felt before in their work with communities. They were struck by the pride and ownership the community members took in the accomplishments of the two weeks, and the warmth they showed toward the professionals. For other team members it was realizing the prejudices and assumptions they had carried unknowingly about the informal communities and their residents, and now they could see them with respect and recognize their knowledge, abilities, humanity, and dignity. For some of the professionals, the key takeaway was learning teamwork—not just following orders but engaging horizontally and

realizing their own capacity to contribute and collaborate. Many of them would take this experience back to their agencies, treating colleagues and communities differently. (Wilson 2015)

Two of our participants described a level of awareness that few achieve but that signals the emancipatory potential inherent in participatory action research: the realization of participatory consciousness. One expressed a profound expansion of sense of self. Five months after the workshop she wrote the following:

> *During the five months since the workshop I have continued reflecting on the extraordinary experience we had. I learned a lot, mostly intangibles, since this work is about living the experience, being engaged, person to person, with an open mind and open heart, getting a felt sense of the conditions that the community is living…. It's not about carrying out procedures. I learned to listen to the community members and to my colleagues, to recognize and relate to the different ways of thinking, interpreting, and analyzing of each one, to understand their actions and reactions. I learned to wait to really understand, while at the same time I learned that you don't need to know everything before acting. This work is about how to work in teams, to generate ownership of the work, to exchange ideas and constantly adapt roles and functions to meet the larger objectives.*
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> *This experience underscored for me the importance of empathy. If we realize that we are all human beings with feelings and needs, we change our way of seeing and doing things. Our intentions become better. We lower our defensive postures and open our hearts. **Then the sense of oneness, of being part and parcel of that larger system, emerges almost automatically. My intention from here on is to engage myself—my whole self—completely in what I do, to make it mine—mine in the larger sense of ours, beyond us and them…** .*
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> *The satisfaction that comes from this kind of work is very profound. Involving yourself so personally, so directly and openly, creates a sense of belonging and a sense of potential unfolding and manifesting. Each success achieved is not just another objective fulfilled, but quite the contrary: each achievement is a step forward towards personal success, because you have become part of the community for whom you are working. And there's a sense of trajectory or evolution here. **You have become part of a living evolving system that generates its own evolution every moment.***

While this participant highlighted the inner dimension of emancipatory practice, another focused on the outer dimension: the practitioner's ability to see the potential for changing social systems of power, domination, and paternalism by introducing new self-organizing self-replicating patterns of interaction. This participant articulated how he could see this fieldwork as a moment in the emergence of systemic change in the relationship between

civil society and the state. He recognized that the work in El Tráfico had interrupted a pattern of paternalism that characterized the relationship between the community and the local state. He saw that the experience in El Tráfico had introduced a new pattern of empowerment and efficacy that was impacting not only the residents directly involved, but also the community as a whole and its environment. The new pattern was changing the relationship with the local leader from the party in power, not in a confrontational or oppositional way, but in an organic self-organizing way. He could see this bigger picture, the picture of a dynamic living system moving beyond calcifying relationships between state and civil society and evidencing signs of evolutionary emergence through self-organized civic initiative.

He and the other members of his workshop team had been the catalysts, he recognized. They had opened the space for change; they had introduced the 'loving disruption.' In Meadows (1991, 1997) terms, they had found an effective leverage point for self-organizing systems change. This participant had experienced emancipatory practice as an emergent systems change process (see Holman, 2010, on facilitated emergent change processes).

For me the two weeks were an embodied felt experience of something larger working through me and our group. It was the sense of being an instrument in a larger outworking that I could trust but not fully grasp. What occurred was far beyond what I could have planned or engineered. In Scharmer's terms it was an experience of presencing, where the vibrant emergent edge of a living system becomes manifest and the field of possibility becomes grounded. To trust in that outworking and focus on the heart had been my greatest takeaways. We had experienced together the undefended openness to possibility in the moment that characterizes emancipatory practice. The two week experience in participatory community development using PAR had touched us at the level of values, attitudes, feelings, and relationship. We had skated on the edge of emergence and had come out changed.

BUSH'S STORY: REFLECTIONS ON THE UNEXPECTED IN ASHEVILLE, NC
Setting the Stage

Things do not always go as planned when conducting participatory action research embedded in complex social systems. Things did not go as planned in Bush's work with the Residents' Council for Public Housing in Asheville. There are some insightful reasons as to why, and explicating those lessons is the purpose of this section. The first half will describe the context for engagement and narrate how that engagement unfolded. This focuses on what had been proposed and agreed upon with the Residents' Council as collaborative research, and contrasts that with what actually happened. The second half will reflect on the experience of engagement, and offer three lessons learned.

There is one community and one organization relevant to this story. The community is the public housing residents of Asheville, of which 6,000 live within roughly 1,500 units spread across the city. The organization is the Residents' Council of Asheville Housing Authority, a 501(c)(3) registered nonprofit corporation dedicated to representing the

residents of public housing in Asheville. This is a separate organization from the Public Housing Authority of Asheville, the government agency charged with the management of public housing. As part of the bylaws to the Residents' Council, its mandate includes the maintenance, management, and administration of public housing building and grounds, the education of residents, working to ensure the quality of life for residents, conducting community engagement on various issues, and providing job services to residents (RCAHA Bylaws).

In 2014, there were many winds of change blowing through public housing in Asheville. One wind came from the federal government and HUD, from a program called RAD. RAD stands for Rental Assistance Demonstration. The goal of RAD was to enable cash-strapped housing authorities to conduct much-needed refurbishment to the public housing stock. In the short run, many of the implications of RAD for public housing residents have been unclear, and so it has been a source of anxiety. In the medium-term the likely renovations and demolitions of existing housing projects will cause disruption and displacement, another source of anxiety. In the long term, the nature of public housing within the city of Asheville is set to change based on decisions and actions taken in the preceding 18 months. This made it an intense and potentially volatile time within the public housing community.

Another wind of change was blowing within the Residents' Council itself. After years of relative inactivity, conflict was stirring within the Residents' Council. During twelve years with the same set of leadership on the Residents' Council, it had gained a reputation for "backroom politics and a talk shop." Newer members were interested in positioning the organization for greater impact, and were challenging the leadership on both its leadership style and focus. Over the course of two contentious meetings, the President and Vice President of the Residents' Council resigned. At the October meeting of the Residents' Council, a new slate of officers was elected.

This is the point at which the researcher enters the story, having been an observer for this election meeting. In the weeks that followed, conversations with the executive staff made clear their interest in 1) a deeper understanding of the needs and interests of the residents, and 2) a closer relationship with the associations that represented each individual housing development.

The researcher's initial intent was to collaborate with the Residents' Council, to identify what priorities the Residents' Council should have for its work in the coming years. The proposal generated with them was to engage in a distributed ethnography. A distributed ethnography enlists the diverse members of a complex social system to observe and interpret their surroundings, enabling the observation of trans-scalar qualities such as resilience and thrivability (Bush 2016). This distributed ethnography would involve the Executive Committee, community associations, and 200-300 community members in public housing. Over the course of the next year and two months, I had episodic contact with the Residents' Council team. Plans to design and administer a distributed ethnography were laid out three separate times. Each time, the design was developed in partnership with the leadership team. Each time, the activities expected by both researcher and the leadership team failed to materialize as imagined.

Why didn't things happened as imagined? An exploration from four angles seems useful: looking at the internal challenges for the Residents' Council staff, the broader context in which we were embedded, the relationship between Resident's Council and myself, and the internal challenges for myself as the researcher.

Residents' Council

The new guard of officers joined the Residents' Council with the vision of transforming it as an organization and using it as a vehicle to empower residents. The reality has been far messier. Shortly after elections, the Residents' Council executive team took to their work full time. They also initiated three projects. Each was, to a varying degree, a success. Each also generated significant internal friction among the staff and encountered significant obstacles. The early period of this new leadership team went through a kind of forging trial by fire. They emerged as a team, but one that had acquired scars along the way. The Residents' Council story is narrated and explicated more elsewhere (Bush 2016).

Broader Context

Part of my learning within public housing was how powerfully memes reproduce culture and reproduce themselves. This can be seen in the particular relationship between public housing in Asheville and the larger city. White mainstream Asheville holds a meme that public housing is a mess to steer clear of. There is a pervasive belief within public housing that nothing ever changes. I watched these memes grinding down members of the executive team for the Residents' Council. Outside groups and individuals were reticent to consider working with an organization enmeshed in public housing. The staff were constantly encountering other residents that simply could not believe that they were interested in change, or if they were that they might accomplish it. Given the number of projects they initiated, and the spectrum of internal and external frictions this produced on the group, this meant Residents' Council staff was essentially maxed out.

Relationship between Residents' Council and Researcher

This added up to a pretty high bar for entry. To do something, I had to do it basically all myself. The relationship between the Residents' Council and myself was layered from the outset. The President was generally distrustful of white outsiders and, given previous experiences, was particularly wary of journalists or others interested in obtaining stories from residents. Despite a number of conversations, his initial skepticism and resistance to the proposed distributed ethnography did not seem to shift. In contrast, the vice president and secretary were enthusiastic about the joint research.

The belief for me remained: if I did it all myself, my intentions would be misunderstood (because I'm a white outsider who has no business being there). When my intentions are misunderstood, nobody's going to believe that this is going to go anywhere. If nobody believes this is going to go anywhere, no one will support it. And thus I have a self-filling prophecy about engagement.

Researcher Practitioner

In other points of my life as a practitioner, I have been quite willing to lovingly disrupt. My previous work as a practitioner has mostly been abroad. Outside of my own cultural

context, but aware enough to understand the cultural cues, I nevertheless did not feel bound by the way memes and cultural conventions that I confronted. I felt free to act curiously, generously, and disruptively. I trusted that over time the true character of how I engaged would come through, they could come to trust my intentions and actions. Gradually the story would change. What is the difference between this experience and others?

Working within public housing I did not grant this trust to myself. How can I act in ways that do not reproduce the stories about power, oppression, and extractiveness? I do not have control over how my actions are perceived. I cannot ensure that my actions don't contribute to those stories. Hearing this narrative in my head produced a fear to act.

I can discern three memes that I had internalized that contributed to this. I can give these in shorthand in the following form (please forgive the expletives): we expect you to screw this up, don't screw this up, and there's no way you can't screw this up because you've already screwed this up.

Meme: The IRB Expects you to Fail
One is the fear I developed through going through the IRB approval process. The process is framed in terms of risk and harm. What value a collaborative process with the community could have seems illegible, aside from in the form of knowledge generated. And, at least in my experience of the process, it was very skeptical of the sophistication of the researcher. Or, at least it was of me. The process conveys in so many words "we expect you to screw this up, so we're going to micromanage you in thinking through the risks so that when you screw it up, it doesn't do all that much damage." Through a focus on risk and harm, the IRB approval process creates a narrative of fear, distrust, and a presumption of antagonism, and fault on the part of the researcher. This is the context created for academics to engage in collaborative work with communities.

Meme: High-Wire Dissertation Research
Second is about tone and implicit cultural norms around PhD research. I am sure that PhD candidates have quite a range of experiences in doing that research. The story about PhD research reproduced by PhD candidates with each other is this: it's high-stakes, your career depends on it, and you're being judged all the way along. The story about the oppositional nature of PhD research is hard to shake, regardless of what the actual experience and support I have received in my program. The story encourages the paralyzing belief that I should only take actions that are safe. As Wilson and Walsh both emphasize, choosing to trust others and taking consistent risks to trust are essential aspects of leadership for thrivability.

Meme: White Guilt
The third is about the experience of working with African-American disenfranchised populations as a white middle-class academic. White guilt is a strong meme. Part of my inheritance as a native of Cleveland whose parents were active in the civil rights movement, whose father did voter registration and cross racial work in Louisiana during the 1960s, is a set of parallel values: gratitude and responsibility. As a white person, being aware of the role of white privilege in American history makes it hard not to feel some personal

responsibility for the seemingly intractable situations that public housing residents find themselves in. This meme short-circuited my will to act in any way, not just in ways that exercised my privilege.

Lessons for Practice

From this experience, I draw three lessons for practice. The first is about the role of a "situated" spiritual practice within our work as practitioners. The second uses the cynefin framework (Snowden 2002) to interpret my behavior and offer lessons for similar future scenarios. The third focuses on a rule of thumb: commitment, not attachment.

Situated Spiritual Practice
Where this places me is reflecting on the role of spirituality within research practice. Research practice involves placing one's self in complex uncertain environments with strong memes about who that researcher might be and what their intentions are. In order to retain that core that I consider to be myself, I needed a spiritual practice that can engage with uncertainty and mystery. I needed practices that helped me remind myself who I was even when I was in an environment that told me I was something else. I needed practices that reminded me what was possible when I engage with mystery, even when the environment around me was telling me that none of that was true.

I came into my work with the Residents' Council with a set of spiritual practices. What I discovered was that those practices were not sufficient in this new environment. My insight from this was that my spiritual practice is situated and contextual. To engage as a researcher practitioner within public housing, I needed spiritual practices that allowed me to feel grounded in that context. In the future, one of the loops to my reflective practice needs to be to identify how a context might challenge my sense of self. The opportunity, then, is to identify what spiritual practice might help maintain or strengthen my sense of self in that context. Each new context of work becomes an opportunity to deepen my relationship with myself, and practice showing up fully amidst uncertainty.

Cynefin: Probe, Sense, Respond
Another way to think about the participatory action research process is in terms of the cynefin framework (Snowden 2002). Cynefin is a welsh word, which roughly translates to Oikos in greek, or habitats or acquainted in english. The cynefin framework divides operating environments into four kinds: simple, complicated, complex and chaotic (Snowden 2002).

In complex social environments, it is impossible to know what the effect of any intervention is beforehand. As a result, the effective leadership is to probe, sense, and respond. The primary act is probing. To probe is to introduce an intervention that you believe will improve operating conditions. Sensing is listening to the many signals a complex systems produces, and sense-making from them to discern which were generated by your intervention, and if you like that or not. Responding is acting to dampen patterns that have been determined to be counter-productive, and acting to amplify patterns across the system that have beneficial consequences.

One way to read my experience is to say I was not giving myself permission to probe. In public housing case, practically anything that I might try to do would be disruptive. My intentions would be read with suspicion. I was aware of how this could take reasonable ideas, and turn them into contentious, disruptive ones. This made me afraid to act.

Another way to read my experience is to say that the attempt at a distributed ethnography was a kind of probe. I sensed that it was not effective and needed to be dampened. Moreover, there were no strategies available to me at the time that seemed appropriate to probe further. What I needed was to let go of attachment of not only working with the residents Council, but doing a distributed ethnography at all. How else might I follow through on my commitment to supporting the African American community in Asheville cultivating resilience?

Commitment not Attachment

I wish to offer a quick epilogue on my engagement with the Residents' Council. By October 2015, I was feeling frustrated and panicky about my dissertation research. It seemed clear that the collaboration with the Residents' Council wasn't going anywhere. Next, I met Sheneika Smith. Sheneika is a staff member at Green Opportunities, an organization in the public housing ecosystem that does workforce training.

When we met, Sheneika wished to create conditions for a different kind of leadership in the African American community, but was not sure quite what that would mean. The African-American community held caustic memes around individual leadership. Its existing leaders had a history of infighting and old antagonisms. They needed a new kind of leadership, not from charismatic individuals.

In the course of our conversation, I felt kinship and attunement. As we talked, we developed ideas about ensemble leadership. This led to Sheneika applying for and receiving a foundation grant host a leadership retreat. I and a few colleagues worked with Sheneika to help her and a team design the retreat, and support them in facilitating it.

Arriving at this opportunity to follow through on my commitment to the public housing community required letting go of attachment—attachment to working with them directly, attachment to how I could help them (through a distributed ethnography). The ability to hold commitment, not attachment, seems a critical state of being for leadership for thrivability.

WALSH'S STORY: REGENERATIVE PRAXIS IN AUSTIN, TX

The theme of "commitment, not attachment" also runs through Walsh's story of regenerative neighborhood development in the Holly Neighborhood of Austin, TX from 2006 to 2015. Walsh grounded herself in a commitment to environmental justice and neighborhood regeneration, but often found herself stuck when she became attached to community projects and collaborations looking a certain way. Through her story, Walsh shares her situated perspective as a white, female urban planner, academic, and community organizer who engaged with the particular set of challenges facing her predominantly working-class, Hispanic neighborhood in one of the fastest gentrifying zipcodes in the

country, 78702 (Hawkins & Novak, 2014; Petrilli, 2012). Although her experience is particular, common themes are shared with Wilson and Bush and have general value to others in the field who share a desire to advance thrivability – the possibility of all people to inhabit, experience, and steward flourishing social and ecological living systems over time.

Setting the Stage

In 2006, I moved to the Holly Neighborhood in East Austin to better understand the challenges of environmental justice as I started my graduate studies in Community and Regional Planning at the University of Texas. In the past, the key barrier to environmental justice was environmental racism. The City's first comprehensive plan in 1928 relegated unwanted land uses and unwanted people east of East Avenue, now IH-35. In 1960, the Holly Street Power Plant was established in the predominantly working class, Hispanic neighborhood. The key barrier to environmental justice today is environmental gentrification. Located just east of downtown, central East Austin became part of the desired development zone as part of the City's Smart Growth plan. By the time I moved in plans were underway to decommission the plant and turn the property into lakefront public parkland.

Would this opportunity for regeneration of the landscape enhance ecological and social resilience, or would the new environmental amenities accelerate processes of gentrification? On the one hand, I saw that the neighborhood's residents were more diverse than they had been in fifty years. As an urban ecologist, I believed that the social and cultural diversity of the neighborhood would be a great asset for community resilience just as genetic diversity contributes to the resilience of ecosystems. On the other hand, I quickly learned that diversity can also foment fragmentation, competing claims, and contested landscapes. Our neighborhood was notorious in the city for its highly confrontational public neighborhood planning meetings – at one meeting I attended a frightened neighbor called the police into the elementary school where we met. This tension seemed almost inevitable at these public meetings, given the historic relationship between the city government and the neighbors, and the threat of gentrification. Participation in the meetings seemed to erode community and social capital more than cultivate it.

Aware of my own complicity in the forces of gentrification as my partner and I renovated our 1907 home, I still intended to use my professional skills and academic expertise to contribute to the social and ecological resilience of my neighborhood. I wondered, are there other ways the neighborhood could bring its long-time and newer residents together? Are there things I could do together with my neighbors that would relieve some of the pressure? With environmental burdens of the power plant coming down, could we forge a path that would enhance the social and ecological well-being of residents and supporting ecosystems?

These questions opened a powerful inquiry for me as I pursued my doctoral studies and engaged in community life. Seeking to develop myself as an instrument of positive change, I encountered helpful frameworks, fields of study, and opportunities for collective action with local collaborators. I drew significantly from academic literature in regenerative design, sustainability science, environmental justice, and social learning, which all share a

commitment to integrating expert and local knowledge for place-based transformational action research (Walsh, 2015). Drawing on these fields – especially the Theory U framework of MIT's Presencing Institute and the LENSES framework of CLEAR (the Center for Living Environments and Regeneration) – I employed a methodology for regenerative dialogue assessment to better support me and collaborators in using ourselves as instruments of regeneration. Integration of third-, second- and first- person inquiry helped me identify my own place and power in existing systems, and listen with a more deliberately open mind, heart, and will for clues about how I might contribute. From a third-person "objective" view from above, I observed the existing assets and dynamics of the neighborhood. From a second-person, "intersubjective" view, I engaged in empathetic dialogue with other neighbors to understand their aspirations and concerns for the neighborhood. From a first-person, "intrasubjective" view from within, I practiced generative listening, paying attention to my reactions and choosing to suspend my automatic voices of judgment, cynicism, and fear that kept me from connection with the highest potential in myself, others, and our neighborhood ecosystem.

As I engaged in these ways, I stepped out of my comfort zone as the outside observer-researcher and conflict-averse new kid in town to co-initiate regenerative projects with my neighbors and outside partners. We initiated prototypes of a green home repair program designed to serve as a leverage point for thrivability in the complex neighborhood. Through this design, we intended to bring new and well-established neighbors together to help another neighbor with improvements to help them reduce utility bills, increase health and comfort, and mobilize assets to better serve the household's vision of thrivability. The specific scope of work for each home was developed through a regenerative dialogue assessment, which integrated objective observations about the site's building and ecological systems with subjective knowledge from a generative dialogue with the household. In creating a deep dialogue, residents were invited to imagine what it would be like to thrive in their home - from their house to their neighborhood. The team leaders used their technical knowledge and assessment of household and community assets to determine which interventions would most contribute to the household's vision. Local green builders would teach volunteers how to make these green home improvements and provide an overview of other strategies for household, neighborhood, and planetary thrivability, and volunteers were invited to make written and public commitments to actions they would take on. We hoped that the dialogue about practices might support cultural adoption of pro-environmental values and habits and also lead to new work opportunities for the local green builders. Most importantly, we intended these events to be generative places where neighbors could get to know one another, discover each other's gifts, and develop as a community.

Leadership and Performance Stories

I have written about the results of the program elsewhere (2015, 2016), including the transformational effect of the regenerative dialogue assessment for the first of three households we served. However, in telling that story, I glossed over my own crisis of faith after the first project and the serendipitous chain of events that led to a shift in direction for the second and third projects, which in turn led to a movement to establish a food forest in the neighborhood park (the first in the city and the state of Texas). This crisis moment and

the critical connections that followed it reveal important insights about anticipatory, regenerative design and leadership practices for thrivability.

ACT I: From Crisis to Creative Collaboration

As a whole, the first demonstration project was tremendously successful. However, we failed with regard to my originating intention: cultivating relationships among established neighbors and recent arrivals. Despite our recruitment efforts, most were volunteers were new. We also discovered that our partnering nonprofits' requirement of a criminal background check for volunteers was an impediment to cultivating trust as we invited neighbors to join a community event. It was also a direct barrier to some who had felony convictions back in their past, when the neighborhood experienced significant crime. Efforts to engage one of the long-established neighborhood associations at the outset of the project had led to conflict and a veiled threat from one neighbor. I was frustrated and questioning the potential of the project. I felt stuck, but I kept myself open. I drew on established formats for feedback from the volunteers about addressing the problem, and I continued to participate with a clear intention and open mind, heart, and will. Three unexpected moments and movements emerged that helped shift my experience from one of crisis to creative collaboration.

Movement One: Frank's Laundromat

One drizzly June day while waiting from my clothes to dry outside of Frank's Coin Laundry, I sat writing in my journal, hoping to find answers or at least vent frustration. Why was it so hard to find long-time neighbors who wanted to help lead this project? Was this a quixotic endeavor doomed to fail?

As I wrote, a man on a bike pulled up in front of me, dismounted, and asked me if I was a writer. I responded a little defensively at first, but chose to suspend my cynicism. I soon found myself in a deeply generative conversation. This man, Gabriel Galvan, grew up in the neighborhood, having moved there in the late 1950s. In the 1990s he had been a community organizer focused on addressing gang violence. He moved away, but returned after he lost his home in a fire. He wanted to get involved in the neighborhood again, he loved the idea of HNHN, and was a handy-man by vocation. He recounted stories of the rose bushes he'd planted in neighbors' yards throughout the area over the years, many of which he can see thriving today. Yet, I was wary. He was a friend of the neighborhood leader who opposed me and the project. He also never set foot in the laundromat – he only stopped to approach me. Even so, he seemed to share my vision of a socially integrated, flourishing neighborhood. I chose to suspend my fear and trust him. He became an invaluable member of the core leadership team especially because he was known and trusted by established neighbours. Also, he became a key advisor to team of graduate students from the University of Texas Public Interest Design program who responded to an invitation to build a mobile toolshed for HNHN. Having heard a strong interest in community gardening, they shifted the focus to a garden toolshed. Gabriel keeps a low-profile, and doesn't use email much or social media. It was by chance that we connected, and I had sohe me good reasons to look the other way when an unfamiliar man approached me. With my intentions grounding me, I took the risk and it was worth it.

Movement Two: From Facebook to Chapala's Restaurant

Social media was, however, an important part of our outreach strategy. One of the co-founders of the project, Jorge, grew up in the neighborhood and had a large Facebook network, Hermanos de East Austin. I regularly monitored our Facebook event page for new volunteers. One of the first people to volunteer was Joe Nova, whom I did not recognize from prior events. His profile revealed that he was in the building and construction trades and that he had studied solar electric, solar thermal, and renewable energy at Austin Community College. He appeared to be a skilled green building professional who might be a perfect team leader and that he might be exactly the kind of local business stakeholder we wanted to support with the project.

I reached out to him and arranged to go for coffee to talk about how he would like to be involved as a volunteer and how the opportunity could support him in areas of importance in his life. I listened with full attention. In our conversation he talked about the challenges of growing up in the neighborhood and his desire to give back, and to be a role model. He wanted to make more professional connections and expand his career as an electrician into solar installations and green building. He discussed his high school experience as one of the first cohorts in the Casa Verde Builders programs of American Youth Works in the 1990s - a program that trains disadvantaged youth in green building. Even though he dropped out of the program, it shaped his career trajectory. Given his expertise and his passions, I invited him to become a team leader and he immediately accepted. He was particularly interested in leading the Solar Screen team, even though he had not done a solar screen installation since he had been a student with Casa Verde Builders in the early 1990s. The conversation was enlivening and established a strong connection.

Movement Three: Community Gardening

From the experience of the first work day and the emergence of the mobile garden toolshed project and the new East Side Garden Exchange (ESGE) that managed it, it became clear that many new and established neighbors shared a love for gardening. We realized that off-site, front yard, vegetable garden box installations would be a great way to get around the criminal background check (which was required for people entering the home under improvement). Marked with a new logo of the East Side Garden Exchange, they could also be a lasting visible presence of neighborhood action.

ACT II: Critical Connections: Solar Screens, Gardens & Catalytic Potential

Despite storms through the night and rain in the morning, 42 of the 70+ volunteers arrived for the work day. Working in 5 tightly organized teams, they weatherized the home, installed energy-efficient appliances, installed solar screens (including screens on the home across the street), installed 3 garden beds in other neighbors' front yards, and completed other ad-hoc improvements. Volunteers had a great time and many were inspired to take on projects of their own.

Interestingly, a few weeks later, I met one of the leaders of Casa Verde Builders. He approached me as asked if we had installed solar screens on the home of the family across the street from the Padillos. When I said yes, he praised the quality of the work. I was pleased to inform him that Joe Nova had led the team that installed those screens - and the

last time he'd installed a solar screen was with the Casa Verde crew. He was delighted to hear that his former student was now licensed as an electrician and solar installer.

In the months after the volunteer event, another serendipitous event occurred. A childhood friend of Joe's from the neighborhood, Ruben Romero, was planning to move back to Austin from California. Browsing through Facebook, he stumbled on a picture of Joe leading the solar screen team. He was surprised, impressed and interested. As it turned out, Ruben had worked in architectural design and was passionate about green building and affordable housing. He reached out to Joe, both to explore future partnership opportunities, and to learn more about the HNHN project. Through the connection with Ruben, Joe was able to land a job with a solar company, which also allowed him to go into private business as an electrician, something he'd long wanted to do. Encouraged by this momentum, Joe agreed to serve on the core leadership team for the third and final demonstration project.

Act III: Stepping Out, Open to the Next Project
When it came time to recruit the next household, Joe, Shiloh (our lead green builder), and I went door to door with of qualifying homes we received from the City. As we embarked on the block walk, Joe began to get uncomfortable. He had decades of memories from the streets of this neighborhood, including difficult memories of harmful actions he had taken in the past. He wanted to make a new name for himself, but he was afraid of being remembered for who he once was.

Joe's discomfort grew as we encountered one confrontational neighbor who challenged us, asking each of us how long we'd lived in the neighborhood. He was upset about the changes happening in the neighborhood and how much he had to pay in property taxes. Joe felt like the man looked at him as if he were a traitor, walking around with the gringos. Joe empathized with him, as he shared similar frustrations and fears about neighborhood changes. He started to second guess his role.

Thankfully, in the same block as this man, we knocked on the door of Mrs. Virginia Romero. Not only was she friendly, we quickly made a number of connections. In fact, she had participated in an ESGE compost workshop and recognized Joe from it. She was an avid gardener and her front yard was full of lovingly tended potted plants. She also happened to be Ruben's mother. She was a perfect fit for the program. Through the regenerative dialogue, she envisioned her home as a place where she could feel peaceful, productive, and proud. At the household and neighborhood levels, gardening was part of that vision. In addition to weatherization projects, we installed a rain barrel to support her plants. At two nearby bus stops, we installed two new benches that doubled as low-water, wicking vegetable garden beds. Most of the volunteers for the garden bench projects came through the growing group of community members working to start a neighborhood food forest, including Gabriel Galvan.

Reflections on Leadership Practices for Thrivability

Reflecting on my forays in regenerative praxis in Austin, I emerged a different person, as did other partners and aspects of our neighborhood's built and natural environment. It took courage and commitment for all of us to participate, especially in a landscape shaped by structural inequalities and characterized by social conflict. Well-established neighbors had

reasons not to trust the city officials or new developers. To emerge as a leader, I had to shed my identity as an academic, sideline observer and a planner who could figure it out. The strength of my leadership came from the clarity of my vision and intentions, my awareness of current social and ecological conditions, supported with a willingness to notice and occasionally suspend my automatic voices of judgment, cynicism and fear. Without these capabilities and practiced vulnerability, I would never had the fortune of knowing Gabriel Galvan as a treasured friend and collaborator. He also put himself in a vulnerable position by opening himself to me. Joe Nova expressed a similar experience of the challenges of leadership in a socially contentious landscape:

> *[Signing up on Facebook was] a leap of faith — Jorge, that was the only guy I knew. I know the neighborhood my whole life … but I didn't really know anyone there. So, yeah, I was really nervous! I mean, I blend in well [reference to light skin], I didn't stand out or anything, but you know, I just have, me personally, doubtfulness, about what I could do, or how I could meet people. You know, not having the educational background that most do … But this was an insecurity about myself. That kept me from going out."*

In taking that step over the threshold of the unknown, he experienced significant changes:

> *It was like a different Joe, breaking out from the sheltered, you know, 'don't bother me or ask me for nothing Joe,' just to be myself … I was shedding the old me. I was introducing myself to the community and the people, to say, hey, look, I live in the neighborhood, I care about my community too, and I have these talents, you know, What's up? How are you? Nice to meet you. Just putting myself out there. You know, it was hard. And it was exciting. … My whole life I've always … carried myself somewhat to myself. You know, if I'm ever going to reach the ideas and dreams that I have, I'm not going to be able to do it myself. I'm going to have to do it with people.*

Although Joe's struggle was different from my own, we both had to step over a threshold into the unknown to contribute our gifts to the project. He said it was "hard," and that "it was exciting" to let go of the old Joe - the Joe who got in trouble in high school, dropped out of Casa Verde Builders, and stuck to himself. He was concerned about the changes happening in the neighborhood, and he wanted to be part of a solution. He had first discovered the project through his childhood friend, Jorge, and was inspired by what he was doing in the community. If Jorge could do it, he could do it too. Taking action helped him assuage the stress of neighborhood changes and position himself as a leader. Fear repeatedly showed up as he navigated the contentious terrain, and he repeatedly moved through it. New opportunities opened up - he finally broke into the solar field and was able to start his own business as an electrician. Soon thereafter, he got his first gig on a building project through a connection he made at the work day.

Looking back on the green home repair project, we achieved many of our original goals - new relationships among neighbors formed; homeowners who received support had an excellent experience and their homes became more resource-efficient, comfortable, and

affordable; a local green building professional experienced professional breakthroughs; and new spinoff projects developed that embodied shared values while employing and amplifying community assets. All of these outcomes were anticipated through third-person systems analysis, but none of them could have predicted or controlled. They depended on the moment-by-moment choices collaborators who dared to engage vulnerably with one another in service of a shared, emergent, thriving whole community.

Although we only completed three home repair projects and did little to stem the tide of gentrification pressure in Central East Austin, critical connections and conversations took root. In the fall of 2015, the Festival Beach Food Forest became the first permaculture food forest established in a public park in Texas – a 99-acre park that had previously been known most for the power plant within it. Friendships spanning previous social divisions in the neighborhood endure. Like Wilson, I had the experience of "being an instrument in a larger outworking that I could trust but not fully grasp." What occurred was far beyond what I could have planned or engineered. The net effects are unknown, but as Grace Lee Boggs has notes, critical connections have been made:

> *Changes in small places affect the global system, not through incrementalism, but because every small system participates in an unbroken wholeness. We never know how our small activities will affect others through the invisible fabric of our connectedness. In this exquisitely connected world, it's never a question of 'critical mass.' It's always about critical connections." (Boggs, 2007)*

SYNTHETIC FINDINGS: LEADERSHIP PRACTICE FOR THRIVABILITY

Reflecting across the three praxis stories, common themes emerge regarding regenerative, emancipatory leadership practices for thrivability. From our experiences, we offer four key propositions for practice in socially complex environments:

1. Embrace tension, conflict, vulnerability as opportunities.

2. Foster leadership as an emergent property of human systems.

3. Toggle between observing, relating & acting in a living system, using self as an instrument for thrivability.

4. Develop situated spiritual reflective practice.

All four of these propositions are mutually supportive and interrelated. This is particularly true of propositions 1 and 4, which we found to be essential for the practice of propositions 2 and 3. In all three of our cases, we stepped into contested landscapes with long-standing structural inequalities and social conflict. Based on past negative experiences in these environments with people who looked like us, our potential collaborators had reasons from generalized past experiences not to trust us. Some had reasons from the past not to trust each other. Through each of our stories, we learned we could expand our potential to advance thrivability by noticing and embracing that tension, as well as our own vulnerability. Our effectiveness in doing so was related to our development of situated,

spiritual, reflective practice. These practices empower us to ground ourselves in the face of social conflict and general uncertainty, and enabling us to harness the power of our own vulnerability. In doing so, we were better able to foster emergent leadership among our collaborators and to use ourselves as instruments for thrivability, toggling between observing, relating, and acting in the living systems of which we are part.

Foster Leadership as an Emergent System Phenomenon

In all three stories, the quality of outcomes generated was the result of many individuals stepping into unfamiliar terrain, engaging vulnerably and empathetically with one another, and answering a call to serve something greater than, yet essential to, each person. From planning professionals outside of Mexico City to neighborhood volunteers in East Austin, individuals found that they let go of some aspect of past identities in order to invite new possibilities in – even when that possibility represented uncertain terrain. When others witnessed these acts of courage, they were often emboldened to do the same. Interestingly, this aspect of risk and uncertainty is essential to the etymological origins of the word, "lead." The Indo-European root, leith, means "to go forth," "to cross the threshold," or "to die," and it originated from the experience of warriors going off to face the unknown, together in solidarity, on the frontlines of battle (Scharmer, 2009). This is not to say that leadership requires a violent battle or a destroyed enemy. However, it does suggest that leadership for thrivability necessarily involves risk. It means letting something go (e.g., outmoded, fixed frames about identities and roles), and letting something new come into being. It requires the courage to step over a threshold into the unknown in order to serve a greater whole and a greater self. Although each choice to let go and step forth was a personal one for each individual, they became steps taken in solidarity. In our willingness to step forth, we created room for others to step forth as well. This basis of leadership and power is both profoundly vulnerable and enlivening. Practice of this distributed, collaborative power enables regenerative performance through both means and ends.

Use of Self As Instrument: Personal Awareness & Spiritual Practice

Although leadership for thrivability is ultimately a collective practice, it is an emergent one that cannot be predicted or controlled. It is both intentional and incidental. The stories underscore that each individual can profoundly shape the field, inspiring new vision and collective action. For practioners who wish to establish conditions for thrivability, this is an essential leverage point for emergent systems change. As Donella Meadows (1997) points out, the consciousness of the individual—i.e. the individual's sense of self and capacity to notice and transcend mental models – is the most powerful place to intervene in a complex system. This sense of self includes both the inner-subjective self (the experience of 'I') and the inter-subjective self (the experience of 'we'). Drawing on Gestalt therapy and intersubjectivity theory, the self can be seen as emergent in relationship to other. In other words, the self evolves through interaction with others (Philippson, 2009). The self creates his/her world by engaging the field. That larger field in turn creates one's self. The self arises from the field, and the field arises from the many interactions of the constituent selves. The definition of self grows more spacious from attunement with a larger field, creating a sense of 'field membership.' "I" is and is not. Emancipatory practice, if it is to be experienced fully, requires adaptability and openness. Ghaye calls

upon the practitioner to let go of fixing, judging, and seeing lack, and instead look with an 'appreciative gaze' (Ghaye, et al, 2008, and Ghaye, 2011). He or she is willing to be touched, to be vulnerable, to question his or her own assumptions and stories, and to be uncertain. In doing so, the practitioner may become 'field emergent in the moment' (p. 29). These moments of self-awareness, transcendence and deep connection were a theme in the stories shared. Our own situated spiritual practices enabled us to experience these moments.

Use of Self As Instrument: Interpersonal Awareness & Generative Listening

Similarly, the capacity to cultivate genuine, caring relationships with others is essential for emancipatory practice. In the post-development tradition, Gustavo Esteva, Westoby and Dowling describe the practice as "a vocation of solidarity…. that infuses community work with love" and welcomes the 'other' (2013, p. 211). Drawing on the 'affective' turn in social sciences, scholars of critical studio pedagogy emphasize that love, which includes but transcends respect, is the vital connector between the practitioner and the community members that opens new spaces for dialogue, reflection, and action (Porter, Sandercock, Sletto, Erfan, et al, 2012). Hustedde (1998), drawing on Wendell Berry and Thomas Merton, calls on the practitioner to create a climate of hospitality, to share stories of joy and sorrow, and practice stillness amidst action. In the traditions of Buber, Bohm, and also Freire, the practitioner engages in and fosters dialogue as a loving disruption of old patterns that catalyzes new ways of seeing, understanding, and generating collective creativity and action (Westoby and Dowling, 2013). The experience of love permeated the communities of practice reviewed in the case studies. By holding a space of care and inviting others to do and be the same, Wilson, Bush, and Walsh engendered a climate for collective courage.

Cultivating such authentic relationships in a world shaped by structural inequality and paternalism is a significant challenge, as revealed in each of the cases. With the risk comes great reward, as suggested by indigenous educator, Lila Watson: "If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time; but if you are here because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together." With participatory consciousness, the practitioner discovers that the community is not 'other,' just as the community discovers that the larger ecologies are not 'out there'. All is in relationship. The emancipatory practitioner becomes aware of his or her membership in, and identity with, each larger sphere. There is no separation. That awareness is participatory consciousness (Reason and Bradbury, 2008). It arises from the meaning that the practitioner ascribes to his inner- and inter-subjective experiences. "We create the stage," says Farmer, for people "to go beyond themselves to focus on who they are becoming." (2005, p. 2)

In addition to creating a climate conducive to dialogue, practitioners must set up deliberate structures to support cycles of dialogue and action in community. Reflecting the action turn in social sciences, participatory action research (PAR) has emerged as a leading methodology in emancipatory practice (see Guba & Lincoln, 1994). A cycle may begin by collectively identifying an issue, deciding what information is needed, gathering that information, constructing meaning from the information, choosing and planning an action or series of actions, carrying out the action, and reflecting upon and learning from the action, then moving forward to another cycle of action and reflection. Wilson, Bush, and

Walsh each employed various PAR methodologies. Wilson's story showcased the value of social prescencing theatre, or theatre of the oppressed, through which individuals were able to newly understand the complex dynamics of community challenges and identify new opportunities for action. Bush's story showcased the value of a cynefin approach to engagement in complex systems, through probing, sensing, and responding adaptively with potential co-creators. Walsh shared how regenerative dialogue assessment – at the household- and neighborhood- levels – could support community members in developing awareness of their hearts' desires and collective assets, taking action to advance collective well-being, and reflecting on performance.

Use of Self As Instrument: Ecological Awareness from "Outside"

Leadership for thrivability calls upon the practitioner to sense what is emergent in a community in the present moment, and then to make space for those emergent properties to come forth. To practice at the emergent edge of a community, the practitioner must start with existing patterns (Westoby and Dowling, 2013). Begin where people are; start with what is possible. An essential aspect of understanding existing patterns is to understand patterns of the past, as well. Traditional roles of the expert as outside observer of systems are particularly helpful here. As Walsh's neighborhood story revealed, systems-analysis of social, ecological, and technological dynamics from a third person/outsider perspective helped her understand the neighborhood's complex history and identify potential intervention points that could help leverage regenerative outcomes. It also helped her understand the constraints and opportunities of her multiple roles in larger systems (privileged gentrifier, neighbor, academic, activist). By noticing these contradictory identities and accepting them, she was better able to relate authentically and responsively with others, sometimes in spite of their first impressions. Yet, although this third-person analysis helped her identify leverage points and anticipate regenerative outcomes, very few could have been rationally planned or predicted at the outset. They were made possible through moment-by-moment choices of the actors involved. The third-person awareness of the ecological whole enabled anticipatory design, beginning where the system is and inviting new possibilities. From that space the practitioner builds trust, creates a new conversation, and fosters agency.

What emerges is a new pattern, potentially self-organizing and self-replicating, able to affect not only the immediate participants but other people and spaces as well. Each time one person chooses to take a step over the threshold in service of our greater potential, they made room for others to do the same. Together they can initiate a culture of thrivability. This cultural space offers a sense of belonging and unfolding, as Wilson described. In this space, as Wilson put it, members "could face their vulnerability and build respectful, trusting, and horizontal relationships of collaboration and creativity with community residents and fellow teammates." Together, they may experience being part of a "living evolving system that generates its own evolution every moment" through the choices we make and the attention we bring forward.

While the possibility of belonging and unfolding in a living system is attractive, the leadership practices for thrivability explored above come with a price. They are almost certain to introduce a new level of insecurity, uncertainty and discomfort, as the standard

procedures for interacting with the public give way to being in the moment, sensing what is possible, and working with what is arising. Using theater analogy, Farmer calls this practice "improvisational ensemble performance" (2005, p. 5) because the situation is constantly changing as the actors discover and create new possibilities. "As a profession," Farmer warns, "we have not [yet] learned to use the discoveries of the unexpected and unplanned for community development practice" (p. 1). The three stories presented, along with the embodied knowledge of an expanding community of practice and supportive literature suggest that the risk is well worth the reward.

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