CHAPTER 29

Reflections on Transformation: Stories from Southern Africa

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INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we explore the meaning of transformation through our personal narratives of early learning in two different worlds geographically, physically, and paradigmatically. As three teachers, mothers, academics, and researchers, we each narrate our journey of starting out as children in South Africa (SA) and Zimbabwe respectively and coming to realize the power of living in more than one world. Our own journeys have also

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made us more aware of the hazardous transitions students need to make in moving through different cultural and knowledge contexts. Collectively, our stories illustrate the right of passage from closed worlds to connected possibilities.

Transformative Learning

Transformative learning includes emerging from closed worlds to expanded understandings and connections. Escaping from fixed and limiting, or biased views, requires not only "Border-crossing," as the eminent researcher Aikenhead (Aikenhead & Elliott, 2010) describes, but, in our experiences, a transcending of borders. Transformative learning starts with the individual and is shaped by our different environments. We move from within our own inner and outer context to a new position of understanding. In this, our learning moves us toward liberation from limiting perspectives.

> Liberatory learning cannot be standardised. It has to be situated, experimental, creative—action that creates the conditions for transformation by testing the means of transformation that can work here" (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 26).

In formal education, learning purposes may be represented in three levels (Fig. 29.1).

Learning aims are often instrumental: for personal advancement, success, status, and employability. A humanistic aim includes broader self-development and caring for others. Transformative learning, builds on the other levels. It is holistic, open to states of un-knowing, able to acknowledge many ways of knowing, deepens insight into the interconnection and mystery of life. Stories may move through these levels and offer opportunities for interpretation and insight.

"What adults learn is fundamentally grounded in the way they think about themselves and their worlds, opening possibilities for transformation and creating dramatic shifts in one's consciousness" (Dirkx, 2001, p. 15). We look back at our life journeys and see how we transformed as we learnt, as new possibilities opened up. In post-colonial contexts, such as ours, the discourse of transformation is often associated with institutional structures. These structures may emphasize diversity and
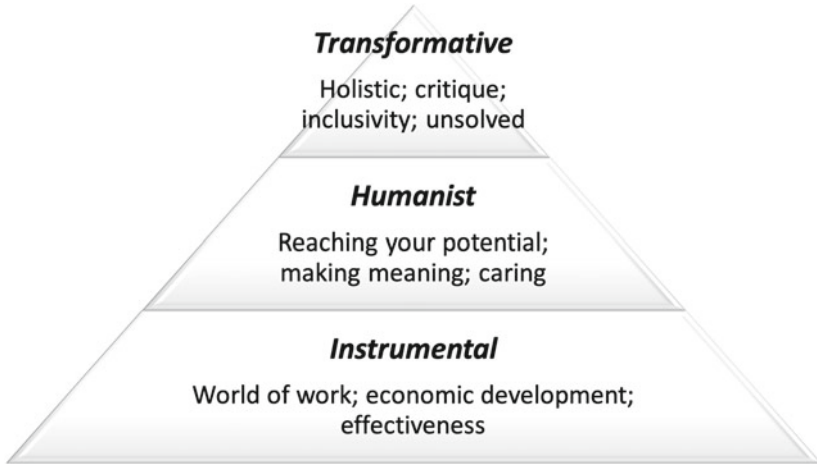
Transformative
Holistic; critique;
inclusivity; unsolved

Humanist
Reaching your potential;
making meaning; caring

Instrumental
World of work; economic development;
effectiveness

Fig. 29.1 Accumulative learning purposes (*Source* Adapted from Malcolm 2000)

inclusivity as the main feature of transformation. This aspect of transformation is, of course, necessary for social justice, redress, expanded opportunities for those previously excluded. However, we suggest that such institutional transformation needs to include a change in individuals, in their own perceptions and life journeys. The resultant learning, as Dirkx (2001) suggests, creates shifts in consciousness. Our view of transformation extends its meaning beyond simple "change" as an event, to the process of being intentional about seeing beyond ourselves and our comfort zones.

As Connely and Clandinin (1990) say, humans are storytelling beings who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. In *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe (1958) presents his main character, Okonkwo, as a self-made man. We view ourselves not as self-made, but as being shaped into who we are and who we are becoming through experiential and social journeys.

Through story we explore: What are the lessons to be learnt and the transformations still to come? How may transformation unfold? How may we contribute to learning transformations? Through story we gain a greater understanding of the world and each other. Stories provide a

healing rather than a factual truth. Stories allow for nuanced perspectives and interpretations (Allen, 2005; Blair, 2006). Stories contribute to learning (Gargiulo, 2006), and combine fact and fiction together with feeling (Mittins, 2010).

For children, the influence from adults (through story, for example, admonishing, disciplining, encouraging) provides, often well-remembered, critical incidents that shape their identity and a sense of agency. We transform. We often use this term as positive but our change could go either way, of course. Losing one's culture or identity could result in a contracted transformation into something diminished (Webb, 2015).

In sum: transformation may happen not just in form but in substance; not just at a level of knowing but of being; not just in policies but in lived experiences. In our own stories we share how our initial identities changed, expanded and became more connected. In the genre of narrative each of us presents a story of moving from one world to another—and in the process progressively transforming who we are.

Our Stories

Constance

As a young child, I remember my mother being a live-in domestic worker for a Dutch Reformed Church missionary couple. I therefore grew up under the custody of my grandmother and my mother's relatives in the tribal trust lands (as rural areas in Zimbabwe were called then). My grandmother had been widowed when I was four, and had headed her household since. As a subsistence farmer, she grew and processed all our food and drinks at home. She made millet-meals, peanut butter, dried vegetables, and brewed *mahewu*,[1] and *mukumbi*.[2] The grocery stores were a half-day trip away, and there was not always money for unnecessary food purchases. We had bread only when an odd relative from town visited, or at Christmas. But do not be tempted to make wrong conclusions: by the standards of our community, we were not poor at all.

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[1] A non-alcoholic drink made from fermented millet meal.

[2] A beverage made from marula fruits. It can be made into either alcoholic or non-alcoholic drink.

I did not have modern pre-schooling; there was none to go to. Besides, it would be horrendous to walk any toddler on a 10 km round trip per day. My preschool was at my grandmother's feet as she did her household and farm tasks. I learnt mostly by observation (and some participation), for instance, while shooshing away hens when grandmother was grinding millet, shelling nuts; or raising a burning stick over the pot for her to see while she cooked at night. The best part of any day would be when she told me a story. Of course the stories were repeated, and that meant I would remember more, sing along better, and ready myself to retell the story to my friends.

Birth certificates and any other forms of identity were not a requirement in the village. Who needs a paper to certify your existence when the proof is there in person? For those parents who chose Western school for their children, there was no standard age to start school. The further you lived from school, the older you were likely to be when you started. My own test for readiness was an instruction to fling my right arm over my head and fully cover my left ear. I passed the test and I registered for first grade at the age of six. None of the learning I had from my grandmother was required at school. My first encounter with the English language was in first grade. We cheerfully sang and recited English rhymes, some of whose meanings we would only understand years later.

I used to visit my mother at her workplace during school holidays. She shared a tiny room with another servant girl. My mother's employers had no children—if they had, I never saw them—but they had a very large house. I was allowed only as far as the kitchen, and would sit on a little bench while my mother went about her servant duties. The lady of the house would frequently yell, "Varaidzo!" to which my mother would answer "Juffrou![3]" and hurry toward the caller. The lady would then say things in a language that I did not understand.

I was among the few who successfully squeezed through the bottleneck of Black education and attended secondary school at a renowned Catholic boarding school. Life there was very different from home, and that is where I got to meet people from outside of my culture. Prominent among these was the expatriate English language teacher who couldn't fathom how after eleven years of learning the language we still referred to woman as "he" and man as "she". I only learnt later at my teacher's

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[3] Juffrou is the Afrikaans for Madam.

college that my home language was a hindrance to speaking English properly. This awareness helped me as a high school teacher of English language to understand my students' struggles better.

A complex mix of socioeconomic and political goings-on resulted in my family seeking economic refuge in South Africa. Compared to the experience in my home country at the time, I realized that I could more easily pursue doctoral studies in South Africa, and thus applied for admission with Wits School of Education. My scattered research ideas did not attract any of the supervisors in the School. I was therefore "advertised" further afield to colleagues in the Faculty of Science. Following a meeting to discuss my thoughts, Moyra (first author) and another colleague took on the challenge to mentor me through the research journey. I had my fair share of culture shock—especially having to learn to relate with supervisors on a first-name basis—especially considering that they were the same race as my mother's Juffrou. Moyra even cared beyond the research relationship to personal and family wellbeing. My husband once remarked, "I sometimes wonder if Moyra is your supervisor or your Aunt!".

My previous experience was that relationships in tertiary institutions were characterized by a clear pecking order, not too different from the army. A frequent question that came up in many of the research conversations with Moyra was, "Constance, what do you think?" In the early parts of my PhD journey, I genuinely thought the question was unnecessary. She was my supervisor and I was only a student, and in my experience, students were there to be seen and not necessarily to be heard. With time, I began to wonder if in more ways than one, my two decades of school and tertiary education had only taught me to follow.

Vongai's PhD research was in Indigenous plant healing, and our relationship stemmed from the similarity in research pursuits. Coming from the same country, our conversations often extended beyond our studies to more personal and family matters. Consistent with our Indigenous cultures, we found a new relationship by totem (Khupe, 2014, p. 6) in which Vongai is married into my clan. We are family.

My present job is in student academic advising. My university is cosmopolitan. Apart from formal training and ongoing professional development, the experiences in my life journey have also equipped me for student advising. Of even greater significance is what I continue to learn through interaction with my students.

Moyra

I grew up in a house of books and writing. My father was a journalist. Looking back, authors largely replaced real relationships. Every night a bed-time story; every birthday books for presents with messages on the opening page. My father read a book a day almost every day of his life (although he refused to read a book written by a woman). At the supper table he would lecture me and my brother on Marxist philosophy, or evolution, or the corruption of the Catholic church, while Mum would tell us to "Sit up straight." Fridays we had fish (one grandfather was Catholic) and once a week we had curry (Mum was born in Lucknow, India.) We had no Black friends or Afrikaans friends. I also had no cousins or extended family. Many things were not talked about. Current politics was one of them. We lived in a leafy suburb in apartheid Johannesburg. I never made my own bed or washed dishes—at least I dressed myself. My grandmother, who grew up in Puna before the British left, never dressed herself and had never even made a cup of tea until she was 30 years old and visited England. Much of my contained life perplexed me and I had no idea there were children who lived in other worlds.

At age four I was sent off to nursery school and ran home the same day. I told my mother I didn't go to school to play with dough and color-in. I needed to learn to read and write and find things out. Surprisingly she was amused and I didn't get punished. Arriving a few years later at "big school" was an equal disappointment.

I went to arguably one of the best schools in the world. Most of the girls' fathers were diplomats, government ministers or CEOs. (The mothers simply dressed well and had been to the same private girls' school.) My friends shopped in Paris and had parties at the country club. We got marks for deportment and the teachers checked the color of our underwear (really!). OK, I'm sure things have changed since then. But I spent my first year at university in post-private-school-culture shock. Three quarters of the way through the year I still hadn't found some of my lecture venues. (I didn't know how to ask a question without putting up my hand.) How is it that for the sum of a few Land Rovers the school gave me less poise, savvy, and motivation than the street kids I have worked with? I didn't make it through first year at university. That was the end of further education for me for about a decade. At age 27 I enrolled in a teachers' college. This was a little more like school and manageable. My 4-year old, longing to learn, started me on decades of study. As

I ventured into teaching it was the engagement with both children and older students that challenged and delighted me. Learning through books or lectures was one thing, but I have learned about other worlds mostly through students, communities, and mentors.

Apartheid had closed us in and schooling amounted to indoctrination. The planned curriculum was exclusively Western knowledge; the delivered curriculum was often Dickensian; and the hidden curriculum spoke to elitism, patriarchy, and Whiteness—and sometimes was not so hidden.

In this journey I came to experience the African concept and worldview of Ubuntu. I could give the oft-quoted translation "I am because you are" but rather, here is one of the lessons I had in Ubuntu: I was driving an old car on a rough remote road in Zambia on my way to the so-called Victoria Falls. A bolt dropped out of the chassis somewhere so the wheel went skew. (That was the extent of my mechanical knowledge in spite of a major in physics!) The car struggled up to a small dusty homestead of round huts and a couple of derelict cars under the thorn trees. An old man sat on a small stool in the yard while ragged children ran around chasing chickens with almost no feathers on them. The old man called some older children to scratch around and find a bolt for my car, which they did. Before leaving I wanted to give the family some money. They refused. I then offered some trays of fruit I had on the back seat—for the children. Again the old man refused: "You are a human being; I am a human being. How sad if we could not help one another." And so I drove off deeply humbled.

I remember only vaguely Constance, an ex-school principal, coming into my office to discuss her interest in doing a PhD. I remember better a year or two later her sitting in the car next to me during one of the eight hour drives back to Joburg from the remote rural village. As we spoke she took notes. I was faintly amused and thought, "What a diligent student." When we reached her house near the inner-city, her husband, Todd, met us in the street with his deep warm smile: "Ah! The academic tourists are back!" as he took the bags. His sweetness, support, and humor, keeping house while his wife was away, touched me. This is how families can be —a healing truth.

Vongai was a mature PhD student, an educator, scientist, and school principal. I was impressed by her work in Indigenous knowledge in Zimbabwe. I was also drawn to her quiet grace and natural authority. I asked her to take part in a study on coaching doctoral candidates. At a point in the recorded session the coach asked her what her role was as

a PhD student in the supervision relationship. She responded: "I never thought I had a role. I was just a student under supervision. I thought that to be a supervisor means you have superior vision." This encounter prompted me to be more interested in the pedagogy of supervision and the power dynamics in the student-supervisor relationship. Awakenings often come from brief statements or encounters.

Vongai

I grew up in a house of multiple cultural practices: African Indigenous, Western, and modernized African. At primary school, I was my mother's and father's student. I was willing and ready to follow but was also groomed to lead through collective voices, cultural embracing, and sensitivity.

I never realized the different worlds of my life until I journeyed into my PhD in science education on Indigenous knowledge of plant healing and classroom science. I lived with my three cultures—and practiced them contextually. My three names Vongai, Tracey, and Kutsigira, all given at birth, reflect the specific practices I adopted in different contexts—school, city visits, and home. Vongai is an official name which is written in all my education certificates and identity documents. It is a Karanga dialect name of Shona language in Zimbabwe which in English means "be thankful." In this name Tracey, I imitated the White Western ways of life which I mostly used in urban settings on visits to my relatives who lived in Salisbury. Salisbury was the capital city of Rhodesia before 1980, the year in which Zimbabwe attained its independence. Tracey positioned me in the western ways of living. Kutsigira literarily means to support. It is family level name grounded in my family's ancestry ways of living. In the name Kutsigira, I took African cultural roles of a family aunt (Vatete). Vatete is a family post in Shona cultures. Thus, Kutsigira connotes the roles of a family pillar—the responsibilities I took up since my childhood. In Karanga families, Vatete is a female with roles and responsibilities of advising, counseling, and mediating among the family members. I grew up in a large family of the surviving seven siblings (three boys and four girls). We never at any time lived as only the seven biological siblings. My parents looked after our relatives from both the maternal and paternal side. We also lived with herd boys and maids who were just being treated as relatives.

My parents worked at a school about six kilometers from our rural home. My father was the school head and my mother a grade one and two teacher. I lived a good life, with enough food, expensive clothing, and occasional visits to town in my father's van. I lived in our house at school from Monday to Friday and spent weekends and holidays at our rural home.

At home, we engaged in life-sustaining activities: farming and animal rearing. Many people thronged to my rural homestead for help with different life problems. My father was a traditional healer and offered these services at our rural home. This was a practice only known within our village community. I kept it a secret in my interaction beyond our community for fear of being labeled primitive and a witch. Though many people, even from faraway places, received this Indigenous medical help, I often felt isolated at school because traditional healing practices were looked at as antichristian. My father was also a community leader who gave advice to village heads and chiefs. Community people visited our father to get advice on the education of their children beyond primary school.

Within my Western context of living, I dressed likewise, went to school and took up a science teaching career. However, I carried my traditional/Indigenous healing background as a secret wherever I went. The Indigenous medicine we practiced is rooted in African Indigenous worldviews. Regardless of context, I did not denounce Indigenous African culture as most of my peers did. This is because I knew traditional healing was useful and effective. I was living in it. I merely did not talk about it.

I attended an all-girls posh Catholic boarding school for my junior secondary education. I later completed secondary school at a day school in the mining town of Selukwe because the Catholic school was closed during the liberation struggle. At the Catholic school all preaching referred to African traditional healing as primitive and sinful. In school science, traditional ways of learning were never taught. They were given as examples of primitive non-scientific knowledge. I never contested this Indigenous knowledge subjugation. I merely realized that it was not for schooling. I taught secondary school science for several years. By then I lived in three separate worlds: the inner self that embraced traditional knowledge systems, the outer world that became part of the Western modern way of life, and the Afro-western way. I associated the language of Karanga with my traditional life in my rural village, and that of English with my professional life.

My parents instilled in me the desire to continue learning. I only realized on searching for a suitable PhD study area that addressing colonial ills of western-oriented science curricula in former western colonized nations, was a topical issue. One theme which recurred in my reading was that many African students struggle with the learning of scientific concepts because they represent a totally different culture. British colonialism amounted not only to cognitive imperialism and epistemic violence but also to assimilation. The Western curriculum excluded all aspects of my African culture. This sends a clear message that the world is White and that Western knowledge and ways of living are far superior to that of Indigenous Africans. Thus, my doing a PhD study at a university which was then White-dominated, and in a nation with an apartheid history, was my turning point. My transformation journey started with my settling on exploring the possibilities of integrating Indigenous knowledge of plant healing in school science curricula in Zimbabwe (See Mpofu, 2016). This PhD journey unfolded my cultural secrets through open talk, writing, and teaching.

One afternoon, as I was engrossed in my studies, I just thought of checking my student mail. In my in-box was a request from Moyra to take part in a study on coaching doctoral candidates. I met Moyra face-to-face for the first time before the session. We discussed my research. I realized that this area of study was similar to Constance's. I was not sure whether we could be friends, because she was White and me being Black. I later on realized that she was humble, accommodative, and persuasive. I liked these attributes so much that we continued engaging beyond academic levels. I was struggling with supervision and got to know about her scaffolding, teasing, and respectful approach to PhD supervision from Constance.

Constance was at an advanced stage of her study when I joined the university. We met as Zimbabwean students studying in a foreign nation. She inquired about my Mpofu surname and quickly said, "You are my sister-in-law because I am a Chihera." In Zimbabwe, Chihera is a common name given to all females belonging to the Eland clan. We clicked on the onset and found out that we shared many other things in common. We are family.

My PhD study made the knowledge and practice of Ubuntu more open and explicit. In the rural community where I grew up, all members are related through totems and marriage. Most survival activities such as working in fields and raising children in accordance to our cultural

values were done collectively. There is no concept of nuclear and extended family. All people of the same ancestral lineage belong to one big family. However, when growing up and starting high school the Ubuntu paradigm became overshadowed by the competitive western ways of living. The tensions between Western and African worlds created cultural shocks for me. I needed to continually switch between the school, church, and home ways of life. I began to spend more time in Western cultural spaces. Before my PhD I coped by using separatist strategies. I was Indigenous at home and Western in school. I now openly use the Indigenous, the Western and the blended lenses whenever appropriate. I have turned into an Indigenous scholar who wishes to contribute to the decolonization of education and the nurturing of Indigenous knowledge systems for the benefit of all races.

Paths of Transformation

In the post-colonial context, transformation is often perceived as external to the individual. In our universities it is often viewed as an institutionalized drive to achieve decoloniality, to embrace the "other"—driven by the need for equity, or at least to comply with equity targets. We view transformation also from a personal change perspective, which is only visible to oneself when one pauses to reflect on the past. Narratives present a helpful lens through which transformation can be identified and understood. Our own learning experiences have given us an interest in not only the process of transformation and transformative learning, but in the ways that this may be facilitated. We also consider: transformation into what? What ontologies make us more human? Whose epistemologies count? The process of transformation begins with awareness, openness, and empathetic intention. The process may move to dialogue and critical reflection, questioning and becoming an agent of change on dominant ideologies.

Paths Unfold as We Walk Them

Much has been said about education for liberation over decades (Shor & Freire, 1987) in South America; and in Africa (Mbembe, 2019; Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1986); and particularly about self and system transformation from colonized and colonizing to decoloniality (Breidlid, 2013;

Jansen, 2019; Seehawer, 2018). This is envisioned as education transformation ultimately for systemic change, but may also be individual, social, and spiritual (Dirkx, 2001). African knowledge centers on the notion of the archive, the repository of memories and stories of people (Mbembe, 2019). We contribute toward highlighting the place of the interconnected individual in the big-picture of systemic transformation.

In a Southern African context, there exists an ancient basis for relating, for being in the world and understanding our place without harming our social or natural ecosystems: Ubuntu. Ubuntu is deeply knowing we belong. While Ubuntu as an academic/philosophical construct can be learnt through literature (e.g. Gianan, 2010; Mabovula, 2011), some among us were born into it and it informed the core of who we are and how we relate. For decades this Indigenous knowledge has been under threat, marginalized, not part of the upwardly mobile pathway that the neoliberal Western education has designed. Suliman (1990, p. 162), thirty years ago, warned: "… [education may produce] literate people who may know how to read books … do not know the ways of nature; people who are alien in their own surroundings, unable to maintain a harmonious relationship with the fauna and flora around them, to respect the balance of give and take."

We are seeing the consequences of this failure in the violence, greed and confusion in the world. We are often too busy getting educated, educating others, and staying afloat in the chaos, that deeper questions of transformation can slip by. It is easier to ask, "Are students learning?" than to ask, "Does what they learn matter?" In all our stories we started in a narrow or compartmentalized world, as people usually do. The worldview we grow up in is part of our hidden curriculum. As children, we may be shaped by, and respond to our context. In our relating to others we may find out more about ourselves; indeed, find ourselves. Realizing this is part of our learning; making conscious and compassionate choices deepens our understanding of ourselves and the world (SEE Learning, Social Emotional & Ethical Learning, 2021[4]); carrying out our choices enables our transformation.

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[4] SEE Learning' (Social Emotional & Ethical Learning). https://seelearning.emory.edu/node/5.

Worldview and Paradigm Shifts

Ogunniyi (2002) describes worldview as a thought system which determines to a large extent the habitual way in which one copes with experience. He also describes it as a way of knowing and living which is embedded in one's culture. Worldviews could be considered synonymous to paradigms. One worldview may be invisible or unimaginable to that of another, and there is likely to be accepted and assumed good practice in our teaching, intended outcomes, and processes that may be at odds with other cultural paradigm. As Bennett (2008, p. 2) explains: "Seeing ourselves as members of a world community, knowing that we share a future with others —requires not only intercultural experience but also the capacity to engage that experience trans-formatively." Thus, we see transformation as shifts from singular and narrowed paradigms to multiple paradigms that align with the progression of time and emerging life trends.

Through noticing worldviews, we are more able to think beyond them, connect with greater awareness, and teach more meaningfully. Through our stories we hope to show that having the ground of our assumptions challenged, we had some opportunities to examine our worldviews and the possibilities of owning a wider sense of belonging. We experience shifts in paradigms at both individual and group levels. Ese-osa Idahosa (2020) urges that we interrogate our interests, blind spots and positionality and through engagement, experience transformation. As Achile Mbembe writes: "… who among us can doubt that the moment has finally arrived for us to begin-from-ourselves." (2017, p. 7).

As one of our rural students in a participatory research project said "I see knowledge is everywhere." Others said: "Knowledge is available outside school." "We have learned to believe in ourselves… that what we think is important." Elders said: "Without respect there is no future. We need respect for the land, respect for work, respect in speaking and behaving, respect for elders, (Keane, 2008, p. 594). These wise words from our African elder indicate a path to transformation.

CONCLUSION

Our narratives may provoke the following questions: At what point did we transform? How much have we transformed? Our experiences have

stretched over a few decades. Our transformation has not been once-off work. We have expanded views and changed perspectives, learned, unlearned, and relearned along the way. We have learnt and transformed through relationship—as we opened our worlds to others. Our transformation has sometimes been from inside-out, and at other times, from outside-in. We are transformation-in-progress.

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