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**Social Therapy and Creating an Activist Life**

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We have been taught to believe that the past determines the present. Karl Marx challenged this—and posited that it doesn’t have to be that way, that the present can determine the past. This has been one of the inspirations of my life.

Another inspiration is found in the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.—words about psychology and about social injustice.

*You who are in the field of psychology have given us a great word. It is the word maladjusted. It is certainly good to declare that destructive maladjustments should be destroyed. But I am sure that we will recognize that there are some things in our society, some things in our world, to which we should never be adjusted. There are some things concerning which we must always be maladjusted if we are to be people of good will. We must never adjust ourselves to racial discrimination and racial segregation. We must never adjust ourselves to religious bigotry. We must never adjust ourselves to economic conditions that take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few. We must never adjust ourselves to the madness of militarism, and the self-defeating effects of physical violence.*

*Thus, it may well be that our world is in dire need of a new organization, The International Association for the Advancement of Creative Maladjustment. Men and women should be as maladjusted as the prophet Amos, who in the midst of the injustices of his day, could cry out in words that echo across the centuries, 'Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream'; or as maladjusted as Abraham Lincoln, who in the midst of his vacillations finally came to see that this nation could not survive half slave and half free; or as maladjusted as Thomas Jefferson, who in the midst of an age amazingly adjusted to slavery, could scratch across the pages of history, words lifted to cosmic proportions, 'We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal. That they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights. And that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.' And through such creative maladjustment, we may be able to emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of man's inhumanity to man, into the bright and glittering daybreak of freedom and justice. (from a speech delivered to the American Psychological Association in 1967)*

I’ve been asked to share with you what I do and how I came to be doing it. To tell you about the independent path I—an academically trained research psychologist—and my colleagues have taken to create opportunities for growth and development for people and their communities. To organize environments that involve all kinds of people—young and old, rich, poor and in-between—in transforming their relationships to themselves, to each other and to the institutional gatekeepers of both local and global culture. To re-initiate hope and imagination through exercising our human capacity to self-organize to meet our needs. To support people to become active creators of their relationality, their emotionality, their learning. To remake the world in such a way that everyone can have what they need to continue to develop themselves and their communities.

The work we do doesn’t fit into any known categories and so it goes by many names—social therapeutics, the psychology of becoming, the development community, performance activism, postmodern Marxism are some of the most recent. Social therapeutics because it is grounded in Fred Newman’s creation of social therapy 40 years ago. A psychology of becoming because it takes human beings to be not just who we are but simultaneously who we are becoming. The development community because it engages in the activity of creating development and the activity of creating the community that supports development. Performance activism because its politics is one of reconstruction and transformation through people creating new performances of themselves. Postmodern Marxism because it is inspired by Marx’s revolutionary philosophy and radical humanism of transforming the very circumstances that determine us through the all-round development of everyone—and by the postmodern questioning of the tenets of modernism including truth, reality and objectivity. As postmodern Marxists, we don’t interpret, predict, commodify, define or deconstruct. Instead, we create new, ever-evolving organizations and programs—in and through which people can exercise their power to create something new, to become historical even as they remain societal, to embrace the individual-group dialectic rather than assume a separate individual and group in opposition to each other, to transform how we do everything.

This revolutionary activity of ours is realized, manifest and developed through a network of independent organizations that we have built and expanded over 40 years. Two guiding principles were there at the start and remain to this day. First, to be independently funded and supported, and not take money or be constrained by government, corporate, university, foundation or other traditional funding sources. This involved reaching out to ordinary Americans for financial support and participation, by stopping them on street corners and knocking on the doors of their homes. That activity allowed individuals to become active participants in the activities and organizations we were building together. And because we reached out to all sorts of people on the streets and by knocking at their doors, what has evolved is a new kind of partnership between wealthy Americans and the poor, a partnership that sidesteps the institutions and assumptions of tradition, ideology and politics as usual.

Our second working principal has been to create new kinds of institutions that in their very design and activity challenge the foundations of their traditional “counterparts.” Some examples: a labor union for welfare recipients (unemployed people) who did not labor and, therefore, were at no point of production; a school for children that denied the individuated, knowledge-seeking model of learning that is the bedrock of schooling East and West; therapy centers with an approach to emotional help that denies that emotionality is in our “heads,” that, instead, locates emotionality in social activity and that defies the medical model of mainstream psychotherapy; a “university” that is free, open to everyone who wants to participate and has no grades or degrees; a national network of talent shows for youth that is based on cooperation, not competition and denies the very conception of talent; electoral political campaigns that are not concerned with winning and political parties that exist to transform political culture—including the possibility of doing away with political parties altogether and creating more direct and democratic modes of citizen participation.

Today, theorganizations that comprise what is now called the “development community” are the All Stars Project and its youth development programs—the All Stars Talent Show Network, Youth Onstage!, the Development School for Youth, and Operation Conversation: Cops and Kids; a university-style development school (UX) and political theatre (Castillo Theatre); the East Side Institute for Group and Short Term Psychotherapy; the Social Therapy Group in NYC and social therapy affiliates in other cities; Performance of a Lifetime, a for-profit business that brings our performance approach to corporations and non-profits to “humanize” the workplace; independentvoting org; and the bi-annual Performing the World conferences. These organizations have national and international reach, with the direct participation of tens of thousands who impact on hundreds of thousands. They reach different people with different specific needs, but all share a methodology that involves people of all ages in the ongoing collective activity of creating new kinds of environments where they can be active performers of their lives. This methodology “practically-critically” engages the institutions of psychology, education, and politics and their impact on people’s daily lives.

Specifically, it brings the issue of human development into the institutions of mental health, social services, education, health care community development, and politics where the topic and concern is shockingly absent. Not the mainstream understanding of human development, as going from inside out in a series of pre-determined stages. To us, development is a social-cultural-activity, something human beings create rather than something that happens to them. This cuts development loose from the meta-narratives of teleology and ideology, from the notion of progression from one stage to another, and from the idea of progress to some greater good. And without a meta-narrative explaining and constraining human activity, the focus can move from the authority of knowing to the power of creativity, from the glorification of the mythic isolated individual to the embracing of the relationality of life, from the need for instrumental and adaptive behavior to the need for the revolutionary becoming-ness of performance. Development becomes a practice of method, the process of organizing ways for people to create new ways to relate to each other, to the environments we are in, to culture, to community and to social change.

Performance plays a central role in this new psychology. By performance I mean the capacity we all have to pretend, to play. Like actors on the theatrical stage, we all can perform other than who we are. Not only can we, **we must** or else we would not ever learn anything or grow up. For performing as other than who they are is what babies do. They perform as speakers before they know how to speak. We encourage them. We pretend they are making sense. We pretend they understand what we are saying. And by playing this way, performing this way, pretending this way, they become speakers.

All of the work we do in the US and around the world is based in this simple but profound discovery: we develop and learn when we are allowed to perform, when others relate to us—and we learn to relate to ourselves and others—as simultaneously who we are and other than who we are.

As an academically trained linguist and developmental psychologist, how did I come to be a leader of this work? It’s simple, really—I was asked, invited, organized. Just as I wasn’t primed from an early age to be a scholar—no one in my family had been to university and I didn’t even know there were such things as intellectuals—I didn’t know there were people who devoted their lives to changing the world. Once I met political activists and community organizers, that’s when I discovered it was what I wanted to become.

Over many years, I have been able to be a part of creating something qualitatively new, by leaving the institutional and conceptual constraints of the academy and bringing the best of its ideas and discoveries with me to be transformed into practical tools for ordinary people. Fred Newman, the architect of our work and my intellectual mentor and partner and close friend until he passed away in 2011, left the university in 1968. I left in 1997, keeping my academic location for the first two decades of our working together. We did our intellectual work in a unique and wonderfully creative multi-disciplinary environment that was inseparable from community organizing. We wrote books and articles and presented at professional and academic conferences, inviting scrutiny of our practices and dialogue about our discoveries. All the while, we were attracting more and more grassroots and independent activists and activist scholars like ourselves, including many from countries outside the US. In order to have an impact, it’s vital, I believe, to bring cutting edge practices and methodologies from the grassroots to scholars and vice versa.

One way to characterize the life-long journey I’ve been on is as an ongoing transformation of the relationship between researcher and organizer. Researcher and organizer have some things in common. Both are essentially creative activities. Both involve bringing a grouping of people together for a common purpose. Researchers create in order to have something to say about the process, the results and/or the participants. As a young psychologist, I was a researcher who organized people in order to discover some things that might contribute to the knowledge base and ultimately be helpful to people, and to share that with others. Organizers, on the other hand, create things that you and the people you’re organizing have ownership of, and value. As an organizer your task is to directly activate people to create something, to change what is into something that’s becoming. Any discoveries that are made are inseparable from the organizing activity, inseparable from activity of creating whatever the people are creating. My journey has been from being a researcher who organizes to becoming an organizer who researches. Instead of organizing people enough to do good research, I now research enough to do good organizing.

I will try to bring this journey to life for you by telling you about four mentors who had a profound influence on me.

My first mentor was Lois Bloom, a researcher and teacher who I worked with in the mid 1970s when I was a graduate student in the developmental psychology program at Columbia University. Lois taught me that to learn how children learn to speak and develop language we had to leave the laboratory and go into their homes and play groups. We had to spend time with toddlers, playing with them, talking with them, performing with them. I learned that context matters, that children don’t do the same things in a laboratory that they do at home, that their talk is coordinated with what they are doing and who and what they are doing it with. I learned from working with Lois that qualitative research can be as rigorous—indeed, more rigorous—than quantitative research. Lois helped me to love research. She projected me out of the lab, and that has been the foundation of everything I have done since.

My second mentor, with whom I did post-doctoral work at Rockefeller University in the late 1970’s, was Michael Cole. Mike taught me that laboratory experiments on human cognition can not be ecologically valid because you can’t see the social-cultural nature of cognition in the lab. He also was the first person to make me aware that science in general, and the social sciences and psychology in particular, are political and that the research we psychologists do can be practically relevant. And Mike introduced me to that very practical and very political social scientist, Lev Vygotsky. Both of those introductions—to Vygotsky and to the political nature of psychology—set the stage for my third mentor, Fred Newman, whom I’ve already mentioned.

I met Fred when I was completing my dissertation and beginning to work with Cole. Fred was a philosopher who had left academia during the late 1960s to do political and community organizing. He also had created a radical type of therapy, social therapy, informed by his background in philosophy of science and Marxism. Fred taught me many things through the decades of our continuous collaboration. One thing he did was give me a way into the world. Lois Bloom and Mike Cole both encouraged me to leave the laboratory. But while we may have been sitting in a playroom or family living room instead of a university lab, we brought the experimental mindset and method of the laboratory with us. What Fred showed me was a way to take the lab out of life. He invited me to develop a way to study the world through actively engaging in changing it. With Fred, I came to realize that my passion for human development came not just from intellectual curiosity but also from my belief that human beings must find a way to develop if our species is to survive and thrive, and from my desire to contribute to this revolutionary activity.

Working with Fred for 35 years not only transformed what I do; it transformed who I am. I feel I am a better scientist for being a builder and co-creator of what I study, a better researcher for getting the laboratory out of life. What I learned with Bloom and Cole—the socio-cultural situatedness of learning and development, the need for psychology to be ecologically valid, the political nature of psychology, the contemporary significance of Lev Vygotsky—has been deepened and developed by virtue of being taken out of academia and brought into the lives of ordinary people.

My fourth mentor wasn’t an individual. It was, and remains, the thousands of people who I’ve worked with over the decades building independent development activities and organizations. It’s the 8 year-old boy labeled autistic who became a co-therapist of a social therapy group. When the group ended he told the members, “I like that I can help people. I am no longer focusing on my problems. I like that. A way I could describe how the group has helped me is it has helped me live my life. It’s the 65-year-old retired health care worker who had given up her dream to be writer decades earlier when she had to support and raise a disabled daughter. She literally wept when she realized she could take a playwriting workshop for free at the All Stars UX—and who went on to write a play about her teenage years in the slums of Manhattan’s Lower East Side. It’s the 17-year-old tough teenager from the South Bronx who learning about improvisation in Youth Onstage! began to teach his friends to say “Yes/And” to whatever offers, however unwelcome, life dealt them in order to get beyond complaining to creating new possibilities. It’s the New York City police officers who through our Operation Conversation: Cops and Kids program play theatre games and improvise silly skits with poor young people of color as a means of creating an atmosphere where the cops and kids can actually have a meaningful and growthful conversation. It’s the head of a major American oil fortune who gave $10 to one of our organizers on the street in the early 1990s and went on to become an influential advocate of our performance approach to development and to donate over $2 million to our organizing efforts. It’s the academics and practitioners in Sao Paulo Brazil, Tokyo Japan, Dhaka Bangladesh, Pretoria South Africa, Belgrade Serbia, and London England who have been inspired to start organizing developmental activities in the poor communities in their cities. It’s the hundreds of educators, youth workers, medical and mental health people we have trained over the years. Like Peter Nsubuga from Uganda who started a village school outside Kampala knowing only that the children weren’t developing, and how he, his program and his community have grown into practitioners of developmental performance. Like Ishita Sanyal and Prativa Sengupta, two Indian psychologists working in different ways with the mentally ill, who wanted at first to only restore to them some dignity and meaningful activity, but who came to experience the far greater potential of relating to these people in emotional distress as active creators and performers of their lives. Like Miguel Cortes and Jorge Burciaga in Cuidad Juárez Mexico, one of the most violent cities in the world, who opened the Fred Newman Center and organize and support people to transform the emotionality of fear into one of hope.

These individuals and countless others have taught me so much about the development that comes from diverse people self-organizing new activities and building new organizations in response to what they want and need. What I have learned from my fourth mentor could not have been learned had I remained exclusively within the university system, because what we have built could not have been created there. My first two mentors came from the academy. My third, Newman, came from the university and showed me, through example, the importance that taking the most advanced ideas and discoveries of the university to diverse communities of ordinary people. By becoming an organizer who researches what I’m helping to organize—independent of established institutions and funding sources—I have been able to be part of, and provide leadership to, an ongoing creative activity that is crossing the borders of nations, classes, cultures and ideologies and that is impacting on the development of tens of thousands of people all over the world.

Let me end by emphasizing that this is not a journey I, or you, can do on you own. It’s only possible through the shared commitment of a group of people who support each other to risk doing what they don’t know how to do. Because if we are serious about creating new, developmental activities we need to realize that we can’t know, in advance, what they will turn out to be. The independent path is not a knowable path. Nor is it an easy path. There are those at the university, in politics, in mainstream culture who will scorn your efforts and even attempt to derail your work. There will be times when you’re not sure how to continue, but if you build a group that is dedicated to building groups, if your group keeps developing what (and who) develops, the impact can be profound on your life and the lives of so many others. From where I stand, the world looks stuck. To get unstuck we need to take some developmental risks.

Here are some of the many hundreds around the globe who are doing so.

[series of slides]

I’m eager to hear from you and to address questions about the specifics of this work, the methodology that informs it, and what taking an independent path might look like in your life.