

The Revolution Must Be Performed

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The theme of this gathering was originally “Love as a Catalyst for Global Change.” I agree. At the same time, though, I invite us to reconsider the unidirectional relationship that this phrase implies. **Might it also be that global change is a catalyst for love?**

Today I want to share with you how I have come to see that active involvement in creating change is a catalyst for love. I am not negating the role of love in catalyzing change. Rather, I see the two activities—love and change—as two sides of a dialectical coin.

In doing so, I am relating to love as something other than an emotion—again, not to negate the emotion of love, but to reconsider how love is created and to broaden our understanding of it **from the sentimental to the activist, from the ordinarily wonderful to the revolutionary.**

I came to this understanding through my participation for 40 years in creating a unique kind of community and a revolutionary kind of love. The mission of this project is summed up in a quote from the leader of this effort, the late Fred Newman. Many years ago, Newman gave a talk to an audience of about a hundred people gathered in a NYC high school auditorium. He told the audience that he was reading a popular and influential book called *The Family as a Haven in a Heartless World*—and it got him thinking about families, communities, hearts and havens. There is no haven. There is no

place to hide, he told the audience. “There is no escaping the cruelty, the pain, the torture. Many people try. They turn to families, to intellectual work, to relationships, to drugs, to crime, to politics. People look everywhere to find a haven. People join communities because they seek a haven in a heartless world. But in my opinion, there is no haven.”

What there is, Newman continued, is community. “Not a location, but an activity. Not a haven, not a place where we can go and hide. No. Community is the passionate activity of supporting people who aren’t looking for a haven in a heartless world, but who instead want to engage its cruelty, to do something to change it, to create a world in which havens are not necessary.”

To me, this is the kind of love community the world desperately needs.

If you are intrigued by or at least curious about what I have said so far, you must be wondering—How do you create such a community? What does it look like? I cannot give you a blueprint or set of techniques. But I can offer the community I helped to build as a case study in a methodology that is continuously creating love and change—the dialectic we call development. What does development have to do with love? Everything. Because unless we human beings develop emotionally, socially, intellectually, culturally, politically—we will never be able to love in the activist way that is both the process and the product of creating change.

So let’s turn to development. What do you picture or think of when I say, “stages of development?”

A stepladder? Or a theatre? If you chose stepladder, you’re with 95% of the population. It’s no surprise that people think that, since the late and great experts on human nature – Freud, Piaget and Erikson – have told us that the human life cycle is a series of progressively "higher" stages that people pass through. And this idea has permeated the popular culture.

I happen to prefer the theatre image. Here's why. I don't think development is something that happens TO us. I believe that we create our development. And how we create it is by creating stages for us to play and pretend at being other than who we are at the moment, stages for the performance of who we are becoming. So, to me, stages of development aren't what individual human beings go through. They are what human beings socially create. A 9-month old babbling baby is not a fluent speaker of English or Spanish. But her home is a performance space for her becoming a fluent speaker of Spanish or English. It is a stage FOR development, which her parents and grandparents and siblings create with her.

This 9-month old baby is very, very lucky. Yes, she is loved at birth. But the love for her grows and grows as those around her create a family that includes her, a community that encourages and supports her to perform her—at first, quite little—life. She develops, she learns, her world gets bigger and bigger, and she loves and is loved.

The support for development and the support for performance when we are very, very young is vital to the continuation of our species. What I and my community have been urging, practicing and promulgating is that the support for development and the support for performance beyond babyhood is a vital necessity for anything resembling global change—not to mention anything resembling a productive and satisfying life.

But in our current cultures, it is very, very hard to continue to develop past childhood—and to continuously create new performances of ourselves. The mainstream institutions, particularly of psychology, education and politics, serve as gatekeepers on our collective action and on our creativity. They dissect, analyze, test and, ultimately, judge us by and with the categories they made up and place us in.

In such a climate, how else but by creating a new psychology of development, of becoming, can we get out from under psychology's self-appointed authority on what it is to be human? How else can we expose the meta-narrative of psychology that explains and constrains human activity? How else can we move 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 desire for the revolutionary becoming-ness of performance? In this new psychology, the development of individuals is performed inseparable from and alongside the development of community.

In such a climate, how else but by performing as OTHER can we the people transform the world? We cannot do it as we are now—because we are socialized to be isolated individuals who commodify ourselves, who are driven to possess and compete with each other, who see the world in black and white, good and evil, human and not human. How else can we create change other than by inviting people to build new kinds of organizations that not only meet their needs in ways that the mainstream traditional institutions do not, but also ones in which they can develop new needs?

Some of these needs include: The need for opportunities to develop and grow and be part of something bigger than oneself, one's family or neighborhood. The need to reinitiate hope and possibility. The need to be heard. The need to appreciate and to be appreciated. The need to develop new kinds of relationships with those who are not like you in gender, sexual orientation, class, education, privilege, opportunity, ethnicity, culture, politics, religion, age. The need to challenge our identities and continuously create who we are. The need to perform. The need to develop. The need for hearts but not havens. The need for all—but especially those who suffer most from current institutional and cultural norms and who have the most to gain, to exercise their power by transforming how we relate to one another and live our lives.

And so, my colleagues and I began to build organizations through which people might exercise their power. And while we did not know how to do it, we gained inspiration and ideas from many great thinkers and revolutionaries. The most impactful on us were these three: Karl Marx, the early Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky and the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein.

They gave us our understanding of revolution, of power, of development, and of how the very way we try to make sense of the world is embedded in our language, especially the

language of psychology. What we learned from these three helped us create our psychology of becoming, our psychology of development, our psychology of creating love and community.

We took to heart Marx's insistence that human beings are radically and thoroughly social, with "activity and mind being social in their content as well as in their origin." We also took from Marx the idea of a dialectical method in which the transformation of the world and of ourselves as human beings is one and the same task, what he called "revolutionary practice."

Vygotsky brought these ideas of Marx into his studies of child development, learning and play, and created a new way to do psychology. He wrote of his own search for a method to understand human psychological activity, and concluded that a new kind of method was needed, one in which "the method is simultaneously prerequisite and product, the tool and the result of the study." This conception of method as simultaneously tool-and-result is the heart of the psychology we have created.

In addition, Vygotsky's understanding of children's play greatly influenced our understanding of what it means, developmentally speaking, to perform "other." For Vygotsky, play is the leading factor in child development because it is in play that children can be both who they are and other than who they are at the same time. I have come to believe that these two insights of Vygotsky, when practiced, are the secret to creating continuous development and transforming the world. If we relate to all people—not just young children—as beyond what they know how to do, as who they are and other than who they are at the same time, as changers and creators, as players and performers, we will see what humanity is capable of.

And from Wittgenstein we got a deeper understanding of the limitations of language and, by extension, of ideology. Wittgenstein, in his later work, exposed serious problems embedded in the accepted ways of understanding language, thoughts and emotions. He showed how essences and generalizations and categories permeate everyday thinking and

create intellectual and emotional confusions, because we are always looking for causes, correspondences, rules, parallels, interpretations and explanations. A way out of these confusions, our community came to see, is to *play with* our language, thoughts and emotions instead of taking them as truth.

Informed by these thinkers, our work of supporting people to exercise their collective power through creating community has taken me and my colleagues into nearly all areas of life, most notably those environments in which psychology and education exert the strongest influence on children, adolescents and adults—like schools, health and mental health institutions, and the workplace.

It all began in the 1970s in New York City when a handful of people led by Fred Newman left the university to set up education collectives and free health clinics in white working-class neighborhoods and to activate and politically empower people in the poorest, mostly African-American, communities. It was during this time that Newman created social therapy, the group therapy focused on continuous emotional development, which today has practitioners around the world.

What began with that small grouping is today a network of independent organizations in the US and internationally where the activist love of changing the world is practiced and development happens. Thousands of people participate directly in these organizations and they, in turn, impact on thousands more. With our performance approach to human and community development, these organizations reach different people with different specific needs—poor youth in the urban centers of the US, Japan and the UK; refugees in the camps of Greece, Germany, Italy and Serbia; citizens in Ciudad Juárez afraid to leave their homes for fear of violence; managers and line workers at businesses who feel dehumanized; teachers and social workers and counselors and therapists fed up with their diagnosis and drug obsessed professions; successful and well-to-do adults who want to give back; people in emotional pain and turmoil no matter where they are. They are reached with the invitation to perform a new world. And to create the stages that make this possible.

Time does not allow me to tell you about more than a few of the many and varied stages of this worldwide performance community. I've chosen to highlight two organizations that are both the home to many developmental performance projects and the incubator for dozens more. Then I will then introduce you to some of the community leaders they have inspired and show you two emerging communities they are creating, one in Europe and the other at the Mexico-US border.

The All Stars Project, is a 36-year-old non-profit organization that brings the developmental power of performance to young people and poor communities. Its mission is to engage the failure of not only the public schools in the United States, but also the approaches to addressing poverty that have failed. The All Stars is active in six US cities. Its programs are: the All Stars Talent Show Network, where young people produce and perform in hip-hop talent shows in their neighborhoods; the Development School for Youth, in which young people learn professional performances, partnering with business leaders who lead workshops and provide paid summer internships; Youth Onstage! a free performance school and theatre for young people; Operation Conversation: Cops & Kids, which brings together New York City police officers and young people of color from poor neighborhoods to play theatre games and do improv, and, in the process, create an environment in which they can begin to build new kinds of relationships; and UX, a free university-like school of development where the classes, workshops, and cultural outings are open to people of all ages. The All Stars also includes the Castillo Theatre, which produces politically and philosophically engaged theatre. Each year, the All Stars involves about 40,000 people who develop themselves as they develop the All Stars community.

The All Stars also has affiliates that—like in Japan, England and Uganda—develop programs in the spirit of the All Stars but tailored to their specific cultural conditions.

The East Side Institute, of which I am the director, was founded in the mid-1980s.

It is an international educational and research center and grassroots think tank, which generates most of our writings and organizes and supports our national and international scholar and activists. The Institute offers in-person and on-line programs and courses, public lectures and conversations, workshops and conferences, and in-depth training in social therapeutics, which is what we call our approach to development, learning, community building, and social activism.

People who come to study with us go out on the streets with our faculty to talk to strangers.



Here they are doing a survey on what people think of mental illness diagnosis. And here they are asking people how they play.



The Institute’s flagship program is The International Class. Since 2004, 132 people have studied through The International Class. They come from 32 countries—Argentina, Bangladesh, Bosnia, Botswana, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Denmark, El Salvador, England, Greece, India, Italy, Kenya, Macedonia, Mexico, Mozambique, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Norway, Pakistan, Peru, The Philippines, Serbia, South Africa, Sweden, Taiwan, Uganda, the United States, and Wales.



For many, graduation from The International Class students is just the beginning. They build friendships that last a lifetime and collaborate with each other and with the Institute, further developing their work and finding steady support and inspiration from continuing to build an international community.

Some graduates create innovative organizations that provide positive, performatory environments for people to grow. Like Hope for Youth Uganda. This is a boarding school founded by former accountant, Peter Nsubuga, to serve children orphaned by parents who died of HIV and their caregivers. And like Turning Point, a mental rehabilitation center in Kolkata, India founded by psychologist Ishita Sanyal. Based on her belief that “performance is a better form of therapy, than any other kind of therapy,” Turning Point works to remove stigma from the mentally distressed and helps them to grow and live productive lives. And like EPOS Efterskolen, a boarding school co-founded by psychologist Esben Wilstrup in a small countryside town in Denmark far away from the bustle of Copenhagen—a school that centers its curriculum on play and development. And like Pandies Theatre, founded by university theater professor, Sanjay Kumar, that is located in New Delhi India and serves the slum-dwellers, impoverished and marginalized men, women, girls and boys through onstage plays and performance.

The Institute also has Associates who are spread across the globe. They are a varied group of 55 practitioners, scholars and activists. Some have worked closely with the Institute for years or even decades. Others are individuals whose organizations we have partnered with in various ways. Many are graduates of the Institute’s International Class whose practices have been enhanced by our methodology of creating stages for development. All of our Associates are creating community in their countries, local cultures and professions, expanding performance activism and serving as “ambassadors for development” wherever they go.



I wish I could tell you about every single one of these creative and committed people and the hearts they are creating in this havenless world. For those of you interested, please visit the website and Facebook pages of the Institute. What I can do is share two emerging communities that are being built by the Institute’s International Class graduates and Associates.

Elena Boukouvala trained as a drama therapist in London, but returned to her native home in Thessaloniki Greece when the surge of refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and other war-torn countries began. Her first venture was called Play is Hope, which began by bringing youth from the camps in Greece together with the local youth to make music together in town squares. This soon became a community building effort connecting refugees and their stories with people living in European and US cities, through real-time gatherings and a live web event where children and adults from fifteen countries performed for each other. The success of this, including people wanting more ways to connect, led to Elena beginning Play, Perform, Learn, Grow—a larger effort involving hundreds of community organizers, humanitarian aid workers and performance activists together with refugees and university students who will gather next month in Greece for a three-day festival and conference.



In the Rio Grande cities of Juárez and El Paso, five Institute Associates are joyfully and arduously building community in the hopes that the love created in that activity can be of some developmental value to the nearly 3 million people who live in this unique border-separated area.

On the Juarez side are Miguel Cortes, Jorge Burciaga-Montoya and Mariana Soledad Loya Parra, psychologists and educators who opened the Centro Fred Newman para la Terapia Social six years ago. On the El Paso side are dancer Sandra Paola Lopez Ramirez and musical composer and professor Chris Reyman.

Their organization, the Institute for Improvisation and Social Action (ImproISA), joined forces with the Centro Fred Newman this past December. The new umbrella organization—Performing Communities de Esperanza—will allow them (as the language blended name implies) to expand their efforts to support children, teens and adults to participate in developing **across borders** through therapeutic and educational services and performance workshops.



PCE is a binational community coalition in the U.S.-Mexico border that promotes human development through [social therapeutics](#). It was born out of the joint efforts of the [Fred Newman Center for Social Therapy](#) in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua and the Institute for Improvisation and Social Action in El Paso, Texas, and it brings together a multidisciplinary group of people including artists, academics, therapists, teachers, activists and social workers committed with social transformation.

These people, and hundreds more, gather every two years for an international conference called Performing the World, sponsored by the Institute and the All Stars Project. Our tenth Performing the World will be held in NYC this coming September. This year's theme is "Let's Develop!"



Dozens of presentations will be playing with, in serious and not so serious ways, the

question of how performance can help to develop our world. I invite every one of you to join this unique event and community.

We live in very uncertain days. So much is, or seems to be, falling apart— nations and government apparatus, norms of diplomacy and civil discourse, civil society, the glaciers of the Arctic, and much more. Is there anything we can count on? Is there anything we can hold on to?

Uncertain times bring fear, anxiety and despair. But they also bring opportunity and possibility. When things fall apart, something new—something other—can be created. The question is not so much what can be created, **but how?** What is needed in order for people to see possibility, to imagine the inconceivable, and to take action? Can humanity seize the day? I want to believe that we can. And if we embrace social change as a catalyst for love, and love as a catalyst for social change—and if we build communities that embody that dialectical unity, I think we just might find a way forward.