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The Partnership Paradigm Is A Unified Field Theory For Human Betterment: How It Works in the Minnesota Climate Crisis Movement

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THE PARTNERSHIP PARADIGM IS A UNIFIED FIELD THEORY FOR HUMAN BETTERMENT: HOW IT WORKS IN THE MINNESOTA CLIMATE CRISIS MOVEMENT

Terry Hokenson J.D., M.Div.

Abstract

“Intersectionality” is a byword of activists today. While we continue to ply our special causes and organize our various turfs, we are no longer content or even able to isolate ourselves within them as if they were solitary silos. These days most of us realize our causes and constituencies intersect. We attend each others' hearings, workshops and marches, trade ideas across the spectrum, form coalitions, and share hearts and minds on a digital scale that collapses time. We connect dots innumerable as the pixels in a picture, while the clouds grow darker and the lightning strikes nearer.

The partnership/domination continuum described by Dr. Riane Eisler (1987) acts as a unified field theory that helps us knit our diverse aims together into a vision of one sustainable world community of justice, peace and vibrant life. It shows us that evil is inevitable when the ultimate reality of interdependent selfhood of all earthly beings and the earth itself is ignored. The theory is helpful in understanding and responding to the climate crisis in many ways. Its antithetic node, the domination model, provides a framework for understanding how the crisis came about through a long process of exploitation and conquest of peoples and natural resources. The same acquisitive, competitive forces that produced the “discovery” and colonization of non-European parts of the world also produced the fossil fuel-burning Industrial Age that has shrouded the planet with excessive greenhouse gases. The positive partnership node of the model offers practical instruction and wisdom and a spirit of collaboration that gives shape not just to a place in the future we can aspire to, but also to the means of getting there. It encourages power sharing, empathy, and cooperation. It shies from absolutes, hierarchies, and dictates.

Key words: climate change, partnership, intersectionality, unified field theory, Quaker community

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INTRODUCTION

Partnership values have been expressed in indigenous cultures ancient and modern, and in countless countercultural currents up to the present. Partnership is dynamic and never

complete; we will always be building it. Working in the climate crisis movement, I have found partnership, as Dr. Eisler (1987, 2002) reveals it, to be a powerful framework for inspiring collaboration and for undoing some devilish knots.

One of those knots came to my attention shortly after I joined the board of Minnesota Interfaith Power and Light (MNIPL) in 2013. Scientific studies had established the confounding fact that even when a large majority of people acknowledge the reality of climate change and its human causes, very few of them do anything about it, or even talk about it with others. In her book, *Living in Denial*, sociologist Kari Norgaard (2011) writes about the profound climate crisis denial among the extraordinarily privileged members of a Norwegian community. Community members were very well educated, informed, and politically engaged. She discovered they had four main reactions to the climate crisis: fear, guilt, helplessness, and a cultural identity involving values of stoicism, optimism, and conformity.

That Norwegian study cast light on my experiences at home in Minnesota, including reactions I encountered in my Quaker community. When climate change was mentioned, there was an eerie silence among well-informed people inclined to be involved in other causes. It occurred to me that strong emotions like fear, grief, guilt, anger, and despair are a little like the lions that Daniel encountered in the Bible story. When we come face to face with these emotions, they can paralyze us. In fact, they seem to place their jaws around our necks and give us a frightful shake, often leaving us limp and numb.

In the Biblical story, Daniel was thrown into a pit to be devoured by lions. However, the next morning the King found Daniel standing intact inside the lions' den. Daniel explained, "My God hath sent his angel, and hath shut the lions' mouths, that they have not hurt me...." (Daniel 6:22 King James version [KJV]). When I read this, I wondered, "What is going on here?" I was deep into reading *Active Hope* by Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone (2012) at the time. The authors describe how compassion (*bodhichitta* in the Buddhist tradition)—the desire for the welfare of all beings—provides the spiritual power for confronting deep crisis and devastation.

I concluded that it was the angel of compassion who had calmed the lions. I thought of the

book and movie *The Horse Whisperer*. The true story featured a horse therapist who used compassion to heal psychological trauma that resulted from an accident. Could we train ourselves as emotional lion whisperers? What if the shackles of these fearful emotions could be dropped? Is it possible we could uncover methods of using empathy and compassion to release the death grip of grief, fear, guilt, anger, and despair, so that the resonant energy of our interdependent beings could be poured into the making of a partnership world? The elements of a workshop began to fall into place.

QUAKER NATIONAL CONFERENCE WORKSHOP

In July 2016, I gave a five-day workshop to a dozen Quakers at the 2016 Gathering of Friends General Conference in Minnesota. The workshop explored how we can handle the disabling emotions that arise in ourselves and others when we discuss climate change. With the help of Erin Pratt, wilderness therapist and Program Director for MNIPL, we built a mini-community of willing explorers and grappled with the fear, the guilt and grief, the anger and despair. We explored the power of compassion and mutual support. Together we made soul-deep discoveries, and our guarded hearts were opened.

The partnership model underlay our approach to our inner conflict with the dire emotions of confronting the climate crisis. Dr. Eisler wrote in *The Chalice and the Blade* (1987) of the need to transform our understanding of the nature of conflict. Instead of seeing the “other” as an enemy, whom we must attack or guard against, we can, as Gandhi, Jesus, and other spiritual leaders have shown, respond with loving nonviolence and speak to what is human within them.

In this case we transformed the notion of inner emotional conflict by recognizing that our response to paralyzing fear, grief, etc. can be to exercise compassion for ourselves and for each other—even, in a sense, for our emotions—that in a supportive setting we can surrender to these feelings and *welcome the power behind them* as expressions of our deep desires to survive physically, to flourish spiritually, and to move forward with each other in joy and peace. To the extent that the dire emotions exert dominating power over us, we can respond with transformative partnership power, the power that opens instead of closes, joins us instead of isolates us, and makes us whole.

WORKSHOP OUTLINE

Workshop description

The workshop was titled, “God Sent an Angel to Soothe the Lions.” Sessions were 3 hours long each day for five consecutive days. The advance description quoted Daniel 6:21-22 (KJV): “Then Daniel said unto the king, 'My God hath sent his angel, and hath shut the lions' mouths, that they have not hurt me.” The introduction continued:

Quakers have historically taken on some giant challenges. War. Prisons. Slavery. Racism. Climate change. Challenges that are daunting, and for many, immobilizing. Most of the ensuing campaigns unfolded over many years, and most continue today.

With climate change, the sense of urgency rings at a special pitch. Time *could* run out before humans can bend the curve of climate change to a sustainable level. We need to find ways to expedite personal and global response and foster the growth of a mutually supportive, all-inclusive beloved community that is prepared to do what has to be done.

In this workshop we will reflect on our reactions to the deepening crisis through stories and exercises, share our selves and our emotional 'lions,' learn a repertoire of compassionate moves to convert lions into allies; and learn skills and techniques for personal and group use in strengthening ourselves, our brothers and our sisters, for the road ahead. . .

NOTE: The presenters do not plan to throw any 50-lb medicine balls at anyone; shock and awe are not part of our approach. While we will invite and allow feelings in order to interact with them, we wish to move in a caring and respectful—albeit forthright—way. Facing the epic traumas suffered by Earth, her living beings and peoples in our cultural history, and the prospect of a difficult future, we shall wrestle with (in) God. In so doing we shall wrestle with (in) ourselves as well. Let us be kind to one another in the process. We're all in this together.

And, behold, there arose a great tempest in the sea, . . . the ship was covered with the waves: but he was asleep. And his disciples came to him, and awoke him, saying, Lord,

save us: we perish. And he saith unto them, Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?
Then he arose, and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a great calm.
(Matthew 8:24-26 KJV)

First session

We began the first session in a classroom where we sat with twelve participants in a circle around a large earth floating on a blue ocean of taffeta. After we introduced ourselves and our vision for the workshop, Erin invited everyone to speak briefly about who they are and what brought them to this workshop, and to describe a special place in nature they love. Later, gathering outside in the shade of some fragrant pines, we played active games to get everyone acquainted. We then sat in a circle and related experiences of deep connection to nature. Finally we broke into small groups and told of how we had encountered the reality of the climate crisis and how we felt about it. We closed by recalling one thing we were grateful for in the session. The partnership theme of empathic sharing and power as affiliation and connection with others and Earth was strong in this session.

Second session

Erin began the second day by asking each person to “describe what weather pattern they would be at this moment and why”. She pointed out that the many weather patterns of Mother Earth are held within her great biosphere, that all of them are important for the health and balance of the whole; none of them consumes the whole; our feelings are like these weather patterns: changing, with important roles to play. She said that as we explore grief together, we can have the intention to hold our emotions and those of others the way Mother Earth holds all of the weather patterns. Using Earth’s processes to model our personal emotions underlined our intimate connection with the earth and with each other as earthly beings. In the context of the climate crisis these reflections on our earth connections proved a bit somber, so we moved into games, tossing stuffed animals between each other and revealing light-hearted facts about ourselves.

After these games, participants were asked to speak about reflections or dreams that had come to them since the previous session. This was a relational care and support exercise

that nurtured our communal bonds—an eminently partnership value. Opening with Earth's weather patterns as a model for our emotions was a prelude to the next exercise: a reading of Chief Seattle's Message as presented in *Thinking Like A Mountain: Towards a Council of All Beings* (Seed, Macy, Fleming & Naess, 1988). We took turns reading aloud, and ended with a few minutes of silent worship. We broke into pairs and paid close attention to our own and our partner's reports of emotional responses.

We then went out individually to choose an earth being or process that we would represent the next day in a Council of All Beings. Chief Seattle's penetrating message and the wrenching emotions it evoked took us further into a deep partnership perspective. This was pointed where Chief Seattle says of the white man, "The earth is not his brother, but his enemy, and when he has conquered it, he moves on" (Seed, Macy, Fleming & Naess, 1988, p. 69). In detail after detail he describes the predatory, acquisitive culture of the pioneers and their disconnection from any care but for control and exploitation.

Third session: The Council of All Beings

In the third day's session some participants described feeling an increasing emotional burden with no way to discharge it. Some felt resistance to going fully into Chief Seattle's message. Erin responded with a story about communication between elephants and whales, who can hear each other's sub-sonic vocalizations, and a game that affirmed the ability of humans to sense blindfolded the proximity of individuals, with no discernible clues. The effort was intended to affirm our connectedness with each other and the natural world through unusual channels in the face of a sense of isolation.

Going further in the direction of creating connectedness, the group began preparing for the Council of All Beings. We made masks representing natural beings or processes (like squirrel, deer, and river) and in pairs spoke to each other of what our chosen natural being or process meant to us. We then sat in council and called upon our ancestors, our guides, our true selves, and the other-than human world, to be present. We asked our beings to share their concerns and to be our allies and helpers in transforming the world. This exercise encouraged the sense of our selves being ecologically as well as socially embedded, clearly

in the spirit of partnership culture.

As we closed the council with words of gratitude, a large eagle puppet dramatically took flight and carried our prayers and intentions to the spirit world. To Erin's shock and delight, the group then spontaneously sang a song of gratitude to her. After the close of the session, Erin remained with six of the group members to practice using breath and awareness of body sensations to process and move an emotion. Even this was an exercise of partnership values, since Dr. Eisler (2002) writes of becoming aware of what we carry unconsciously in order to bring about change in ourselves.

Fourth session: A Poem of Partnership

On day four of the workshop, Louis Alemayehu, an African-American jazz poet, raconteur and culture therapist, performed his epic poem, "Akhenaten's Dream: SunRise!" pacing slowly around the room, challenging us to acknowledge the deep connections between domination cultures and the climate crisis, and the impact both have on humanity the world over. The poem celebrates the vital world beyond "ism's," beyond ownership, governments, and exploitations, beyond our graves; it ultimately offers a healing vision of extended family in the partnership model as we transition to a sustainable world. The poem is a sweeping, moving rendition of the partnership paradigm. It brought the planetary climate emergency down to a personal existential level and offered a vision of pure partnership, free of the elements of domination.

Akhenaten's Dream: SunRise! by Louis Alemayehu (used with permission)

Beyond your flesh
Beyond your room
your house
your piece of ground,
your town.
Beyond your state, region or country,
Beyond your continent or island,

Beyond the *3rd Stone from the Sun* - our sweet Mother Earth,
Beyond your mother, father, family, nation, race, class and gender
Beyond all that...

Yeah, beyond capitalism, socialism, racism, classism, nationalism,
and the FASCISM that loves all our ISMS of whatever flavor,
Yeah, beyond Jesus, Jonah, Buddha, Mohamed, Musa, Joseph Smith,
and all the Divine Mothers cradling us,
cradling us all, all,
Beyond our hunger for oil, gas, coal, uranium and wood
burning, burning, burning,
daily choking
the life from the precious air we breath
and all that breathes us,
Beyond roach dust, mercury and lead
Choking the life from the lungs, brains and nervous tissue of our babies,
Beyond our tears of joy or rage
Beyond all our graves!
Beyond
Politics,
Sociology,
Spirituality,
Our humanity or the latest theory -
We now think explains it all,
Beyond all we believe is either grief or joy
Who really knows distances in this vastness called Universe?

Who really knows the cost of our comfort?
Of all the petty energy consuming stuff we think we have a right to:
“Central heating
Air conditioning,

*Cars,
Airplanes
Electric lights
Inexpensive clothing,
Recorded music, movies, hip replacement surgery and
Your national defense!”*

If you love your Country more than the Earth that cradles her,
If you keep burning the fuel of fossils,
You are dumping in your living rooms
You are torching your rafters
Feeding your babies a formula full of arsenic, mercury and lead.

Wake up and live now
In Sunflower Splendor!
Open Morning Glory!
Wake up for the first time and LIVE!

What you have a right to is the Natural World.
What you have a right to is your movement through Seasons.
Embodied or not, as everything turns, turns, turns...
We are dancing inside Nearness
Dancing in the Sacred Web of Life made of
Mud and starlight
Semen and seasons
Novas and notions
Stardust and the chorus of all singing planets known and un.
(What? There's a new one now???)
Anthills' industrious grit and constellations spilling
'cross the unnamed expanses of sweet home AllWhere,

Ultimately, who we are, is not the bag of skin we are in.
Our energy spreads throughout all that is Creation:
Tendrils woven and weaving through all Mother-matter, touching.
We are touching all things all the time in Unity,
whether we know it or not.
We are flying-spinning through Space,
All the time timelessly, endlessly, eternally, infinity!
What a trip! Feel it!

And now I press my palm against your heart-breast,
I speak softly to you, as you see it and feel it now too:
I see you now with the eyes of my heart,
No enemy, no other...
Transformed, revealed, awakened and naked,
Crying for a Vision now quaking,
Beyond this global war zone of our own making,
The stuff of conflict, greed, arrogance & fear,
Will this be the inheritance of our babies' babies' babies?
Will our babies have babies?
Will they survive?
Will they want to?

Touch me brother with kinds hands,
Embrace me sister with hope-heart (we are safe in this wisdom).
Death has no dominion over Life,
Death is a twin to Life - a ying/yang unity of unending Life
In all its forms and possibility.
Touch beyond all boundaries and identities fearlessly,
Let us all Touch the Earth with our naked feet
And be glad!

For the Earth to live America must die...

Yeah I said it!

For the Earth to live America must die!

For the Earth to live ALL nations must die.

For the Earth to live Germany

Spain

England

Egypt

Azania

China and Guatemala and all their sisters,

All must die, must be transformed.

The Snow will make us friends.

The Rain will make us family.

The Sun will melt all hearts,

All Gods chillin gonna have rhythm now.

The Wind will teach us a New Song that everyone can sing,

ROBUSTLY! Rooted in a Deep Democracy beyond what we know now.

Listen!

My friends are committing suicide now...

To me it says something about how toxic our environment has become.

They don't want to be here anymore.

It's become physically, spiritually - toxic!

To me it begs the question of,

How do we recognize what is Sacred in our lives and be centered in that?

How do we recognize the green sprouts coming through the concrete and treasure that?

How do we recognize where the renewal is emerging and become one with that?

How do we "Walk the Way of the New World"?

Wherever we are going, we will all go together or not go at all!

There are spaces in the Heart as vast as the Universe,

And who knows distances in this vastness...?

I see you now. I see you now. I see you now...

So touch me now with kind hands
In this mornings' glory!
Transformed, revealed, awakened, naked
With kind hands, hand in hand in hand...
Gripping! I got you now! I got you now!
Stepping gently on this Holy Earth
Now striding toward...
SunRise!

Take my hand
And together we can make it.
So when I am afraid
I know you are there for me
As I am for you.
I am because you are
I am because you are
We are lovely locked together
Oh blessed curse!
It is natural compassion
A green & verdant celebration
We are rescued from our egos!
Our world is spinning & springing into renewal
...and yeah, it hurts like hell -
that's the way it is, isn't it?
We feel there is no beginning and no end
There was never any more beginning than there is now
Nor any more youth or age than there is now
And will be never any more heaven or hell than there is right now
Man & woman, man & man, woman to woman, all!
Mating in mirth and magic
Manifesting a new world with our breathing and being

There is no sanctuary except in compassionate action
There is no sanctuary except in compassionate action
No nation, no race, no religion, no gender
Blossoming burst of energy on our Liberation Day
On the radiant Kundalini ground
We shudder in Holiness
Earth is home, Earth is home, home, home, home, ooommmmmmm!
(To view a professionally produced video of Louis Alemayehu performing “Akhenaten's Dream: SunRise!”
<https://vimeo.com/31617471>)

Fifth session

On day five our work culminated with a guided meditation, a Quaker “Experiment with Light” (Ambler, 2002) wherein we opened ourselves to what Quakers call the inward teacher. In this process we centered down in stillness, quieting our thoughts. We then allowed our minds to open to a truth that concerned us personally about what was happening in the world around sustainability. We held this truth, as it presented itself to us individually, and invited the light, the inward teacher, to grant us more insight into how it troubled us. We waited in the light and I sensed that the spirit of submitting to the truth was widely shared. Meeting the anxiety of climate calamity within the comforting embrace of long-practiced silent worship, I felt calmed and still. The silence held. Then we broke with handshakes around the circle. In this way we invoked an ancient partnership with creative healing power.

MOVING INNER LEARNING TO THE OUTER WORLD: MINNESOTA INTERFAITH POWER AND LIGHT

A Power and Light Utility

In Minnesota, as elsewhere, “power” and “light” frequently are words in the names of electric utility companies. I like to think of Minnesota Interfaith Power & Light (MNIPL) as a faith utility, distributing embodied spiritual “power and light” to people of diverse faith traditions. I'm proud to say that better than half of MNIPL’s staff and board are female. MNIPL helps members of many faith traditions organize to educate and respond to the

climate crisis. MNIPL offers them concrete options for action. Along the way, participants build connections across faiths, finding and holding up the common element at the heart of all faiths, the golden rule that invites us to treat others as we wish to be treated. It is not difficult to discern this same core value at the heart of partnership (Eisler, 2002).

Climate Conversations

The spirit of partnership breathed life into another MNIPL practice that has become a centerpiece of our program. In the fall of 2012, Minnesota became the first state in the nation to defeat an effort to amend its constitution to limit legal marriage to heterosexual couples. How did Minnesota do it? Organizers adopted a conversation campaign technique that dispensed with domination-inflected preachy arguments based on rights and principles, and instead approached voters humbly with a heart-based appeal, a partnership overture. Voters were asked to talk about what marriage means to them. That launched them into heartfelt reflections on deeply held values. They talked about love, about commitment, about caring. After listening closely, the interviewer then suggested that gay couples simply want the same things. The approach connected with voters. Minnesota flipped the poll numbers and, as those in the movement say, “Love won.” (<http://howlovewon.com/>)

MNIPL decided to try a similar approach and developed *climate conversations* (<http://mnipl.org/what-we-do/programs-3/climate-conversations.html>). This style of “relational organizing” employs the power of value-based conversations. MNIPL activists now routinely ask folks to tell a story about themselves—about an early experience that connected them to nature or led them to stand up for fairness. These conversations are a vital and fruitful part of MNIPL’s mission. Again, its principle lives near the core of the partnership paradigm. MNIPL hasn’t abandoned policy, principles or science; it has just surrounded them with compassion.

Tackling Racism

In addition to embracing faith traditions as diverse as Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, and Islam, MNIPL also stepped up to the challenge of racism. When the state legislature and the Public Utilities Commission made community solar gardens feasible (a program in which an array may be located on unused land or an offsite roof and subscribed

to by a number of residents and businesses), activists at MNIPL worried that affluent white communities and businesses would use their social and political privilege to exploit the opportunity, and poor and traditionally marginalized communities would be left out. So MNIPL formed a coalition with several other organizations, including a strong local African American-led racial justice group called Neighborhoods Organizing for Change (www.mnnoc.org) and established a community solar garden project to be built on the roof of Shiloh Temple International Ministries in North Minneapolis.

After countless meetings and much sweat and tears, the project is nearing completion. The solar panels are scheduled to be installed in the fall of 2016 and the array is largely subscribed. The project, named *Just Community Solar*, also inspired social justice innovations such as access for people without standard credit scores, solar jobs for members of the predominantly black neighborhood, and a solar workshop for young people at Shiloh Temple called “Just B Solar Camp” (<http://mnipl.org/what-we-do/programs-3/just-b-solar-camp.html>).

In the course of the Shiloh project MNIPL has forged reciprocal ties between economically, racially and culturally estranged constituencies and has also broken new cooperative ground with other activist organizations. Collaborative efforts have led to hearings by the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission on equal access to community solar arrays for the least privileged members of our community.

Cooperatives 'R' Us

One of the key partners in the coalition that made the Just Community Solar program come alive is the developer, Cooperative Energy Futures (CEF), which, as the name suggests, is organized as a cooperative. CEF has done a prodigious amount of the heavy lifting to educate, organize, finance and build this community solar project and many other projects making a renewable energy future a reality. This partnership model demonstrates Minnesota’s long and robust cooperative enterprise history.

I have covered only a slice of the partnership action in Minnesota. Minnesota 350, Sierra Club, Honor the Earth, Indigenous Environmental Network, Black Lives Matter, churches, mosques, synagogues and many other groups are working together to bring about a fossil-

free, nuclear-free future and to create a just, peaceful, and sustainable society. We still encounter the rocks of domination culture within and outside of ourselves and our organizations, so we practice dissolving rocks, using strong partnership solvents like compassion and respect.

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