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Mark Hathaway

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto

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Transformative Learning and the Ecological Crisis: Insights from *The Tao of Liberation*

Mark Hathaway

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto

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Abstract: The complexity and scale of the ecological crisis poses unique challenges to transformative learning. To address these, *The Tao of Liberation* (Hathaway & Boff, 2009) offers insights to reconceptualize transformative learning from an ecological perspective, including new ways of framing learning goals, the nature of liberation, and the process of worldviews transformation. *The Tao* also provides analysis addressing some of the key psychological obstacles impeding transformative learning related to the ecological crisis. Finally, *The Tao* outlines four “paths to liberation” that suggest concrete processes that can foster integral transformative learning.

Introduction

We stand at a critical moment in Earth’s history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise.... The choice is ours: form a global partnership to care for Earth and one another or risk the destruction of ourselves and the diversity of life. (The Earth Charter, 2000).

As humanity finds itself at what is arguably the most crucial crossroads in its history, we as educators are challenged to think deeply about the question of transformation. Cassell and Nelson (2010) argue that science and technology – by themselves – cannot save us from “impending ecological disaster.” We need to radically change our way of life if we are to avoid the wholesale destruction of ecosystems, and this requires “a fundamental transformation,” including “the development of a new paradigm, a new lens through which the Western mind can adjust its view of society, education and learning, citizenship, and the nature of human habitation on Earth” (p. 183).

Theodore Roszak (1992) astutely observes that our current crisis must be seen as “more than a random catalogue of mistakes, miscalculations, and false starts that can easily be made good with a bit more expertise in the right places.” The very beliefs, values, and assumptions – or worldview – underpinning our society are pathological in nature – constituting a collective form of delusion. Therefore, “nothing less than an altered sensibility is needed, a radically new standard of sanity that... uproots the fundamental assumptions of industrial life” (p. 232). While transformative learning theory has traditionally focused on “perspective transformation” (Mezirow, 1978, 2009), shifting to an ecological worldview is particularly challenging due to the depths of the transformation required and the entrenched cultural dynamics that perpetuate the status quo.

In *The Tao of Liberation: Exploring the Ecology of Transformation* (Hathaway & Boff, 2009), Brazilian eco-liberation theologian Leonardo Boff and I frame the transformative learning needed to address these challenges in terms of a search for *wisdom* – the wisdom needed to

understand the nature of the global crisis, imagine new ways of working for transformation, and guide us toward a vision of sanity. We use the ancient Chinese word “Tao” – meaning a “way” leading to harmony, peace, and right-relationship – to describe this kind of “walking wisdom.” The Tao can be understood as both the way the universe works and the flowing cosmic structure that cannot be described, only tasted – suggesting that wisdom can be apprehended by perceiving the subtle workings of the cosmos itself.

Drawing on insights from economics, psychology, deep ecology, quantum physics, systems theory, the story of cosmic evolution, and diverse spiritual traditions, *The Tao* weaves together insights to envision a liberating wisdom for our times which can both broaden and deepen our understanding of transformative learning. After exploring how *The Tao* relates to transformative learning theory, we will examine in more detail some of the psychological obstacles that can disempower adults and prevent them from acting fruitfully to address the ecological crisis. The paper concludes by exploring ways to foster transformative learning through four “paths toward liberation” that form the core of an integral “ecology of transformation.”

Transformative Learning, Liberation, and Worldviews

Transformative learning theories share the basic assumption that education must go beyond “informational learning” (changing *what* we know) to changing *how* we know. In so doing, these theories come closer to the etymological meaning of *education* as educating, or drawing forth (Kegan, 2000). While *The Tao* shares this understanding, it extends it to encompass the ecological context of learning by speaking of education as “an intrinsically transformative process” of drawing forth wisdom that “enables us, as humans, to become more attuned to both our local ecosystem and the wider cosmic story while facilitating a creative and harmonious interaction with other humans and the wider Earth community” (Hathaway & Boff, 2009, p. 364). While transformative learning normally assumes epistemological change, *The Tao* goes one step further by affirming that, to address the roots of our current crisis, we need to change the very way we perceive and understand reality – i.e. our ontology.

The Tao, like social-emancipatory approaches to transformative learning, recognizes the importance of *liberation*, understood as developing the critical subjectivity necessary to struggle against oppression. At the same time, *The Tao* affirms the importance of the psycho-spiritual dimension of liberation as self-realization, resonating with psychoanalytic approaches. While including both these, *The Tao* frames liberation in a broader, eco-cosmological context: We are liberated insofar as we realize our potential as creative, life-enhancing participants within the unfolding evolution of Earth. Drawing on Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry’s idea of the cosmogenic principle (1992), liberation is conceived as a transformative process characterized by strengthening communion, broadening diversity, and deepening the dynamics of creative self-organization.

Within this framework, the goals of transformative learning are also reconceptualized. In Jack Mezirow’s theory of perspective transformation, the goal of transformative learning is to become a more critical and autonomous thinker (Mezirow, 1997). As well, learners adopt new “frames of reference” that are increasingly more inclusive, permeable, differentiating, and integrative (Taylor, 2008). Psychoanalytic frameworks, in contrast, place more emphasis on the process of individuation, “a lifelong journey of coming to understand oneself through reflecting on the psychic structures” which leads to the “discovery of new talents, a sense of empowerment

and confidence, a deeper understanding of one's inner self, and a greater sense of self-responsibility" (Taylor, 2008, p. 7).

While *The Tao* would not dispute the importance of most of these goals, it reframes them in an ecological, and even cosmogenic, context. Instead of autonomy and individuation, interdependence and the development of the "ecological self" are emphasized. *The Tao* quotes Einstein speaking of the need to widen "our circles of compassion to embrace all living creatures" (as cited in Hathaway & Boff, 2009, p. 115). Ultimately, the goal of transformative learning is to develop wisdom, understood here to be the capacity to participate fruitfully in the ongoing process of evolution toward ever-greater interdependence, differentiation, and creative self-organization.

Both *The Tao* and Mezirow's (1978) classic theory of perspective transformation emphasize the importance of changing worldviews, yet there are also differences in the two approaches. For Mezirow, transformative learning requires a shift in one's "frames of reference" which are "coherent bod[ies] of experience" including "associations, concepts, values, feelings" and "conditioned responses" that define a "life world." The assumptions these embody "selectively shape and delimit expectations, perceptions, cognition, and feelings" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5). These "habits of mind" are in many respects analogous to worldviews. In practice, however, Mezirow uses perspective transformation to describe phenomena that do not necessarily imply a fundamental change in one's orientation to the world, except when he refers to "epochal" transformations – changes which are considered far less common and far more difficult than most.

The Tao is primarily concerned with epochal transformations, changes that uproot "the fundamental assumptions of industrial life." It affirms that we all hold basic, though often unconscious, beliefs about both the nature of reality and the way the world works – including the process of transformation itself. These may both limit our ability to perceive problems clearly and circumscribe our imaginations as we attempt to conceive a path toward liberation.

In examining the importance of worldviews transformation, *The Tao* resonates most strongly with the theories of Edmund O'Sullivan (2002) which affirms that "transformative learning involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and irreversibly alters our way of being in the world" that affects both our relationship with other human beings and the greater Earth community, including "our understanding of relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race and gender; our body awarenesses, our visions of alternative approaches to living; and our sense of possibilities for social justice and peace and personal joy" (p. 1).

Like O'Sullivan, *The Tao* affirms that, to move towards a worldview that could serve as a foundation for a more sustainable and just human society, we need to recover a functional cosmology – a living, coherent understanding of the origin, evolution, destiny, and purpose of the cosmos, and the role of humans within it. *The Tao* therefore explores both the roots of our current, dysfunctional cosmology as well as insights from science and spiritual traditions that can form the foundation of an integral, evolutionary worldview capable of inspiring and guiding transformative action. Before doing so, however, *The Tao* first explores the obstacles that impede transformation.

Obstacles to Transformative Learning

While Taylor (2008) notes some recent interest in examining the obstacles that may inhibit transformative learning in individuals, relatively little attention has been given to the systemic and psychological barriers to transformation. In contrast, *The Tao* orients itself around the question: Why is it so difficult to bring about the changes so urgently needed to create a sustainable future? It then carries out a thorough analysis of the systems of exploitation that underpin our current globalized, industrial growth society, revealing the irrational and pathological nature of the systems destroying life as well as the worldview that underpins them.

Yet, it may be *The Tao*'s analysis of psychological obstacles that has the most direct relationship to transformative learning theory. For Mezirow (1978, 2000), the process of transformation begins with a disorienting dilemma which stimulates self-examination – often accompanied by feelings of anger, shame, fear, or guilt. This leads the learner to critically reassess assumptions, beginning in earnest the transformative process. Subsequent research (Taylor, 1997), however, has raised the question: Why does perspective transformation result from some disorienting dilemmas, but not with others? Taylor's research suggests that a key may lie in moving beyond Mezirow's initial reliance on rational, critical thinking to include the role of emotions, intuition, empathy, and other forms of knowing.

With regards to our current ecological crisis, these questions take on a new urgency. The threat posed by global climate change, for example, theoretically should serve as a disorienting dilemma that might spark a perspective transformation – presumably, to a more deeply ecological worldview – that in turn would inspire us to take effective action to address the crisis. Yet, while this arguably has occurred in many individuals, such a shift is not clearly discernable in the population at large.

Why do we largely seem to suffer a collective paralysis in addressing the ecological crisis? As *The Tao* notes, until the mid-twentieth century, every generation of humans lived with the tacit assurance that other generations would follow them. This is no longer the case. Humans are now destroying entire ecosystems, and even destabilizing the systems essential to the sustenance of life. This realization is so painful that we seek to avoid it; we may retreat into denial, escape into addictions, or fall into despair (Walsh, 1984). Moreover, at a systemic level, a whole series of pressures reinforce our paralysis in order to maintain the status quo. For example, a half-trillion-dollar-a-year advertising industry actively fuels our consumerist addiction – distracting us from the urgency of the crisis. Mass-media and educational systems may also fragment our view of reality or accentuate the voices of denial.

In facilitating transformative learning addressing the ecological crisis, adult educators therefore need to recognize and work with the fear of pain associated with our dread for the future. As Macy and Brown observe, “the very danger signals that should rivet our attention, summon up the blood, and bond us in collective action, tend to have the opposite effect. They make us want to pull down the blinds and busy ourselves with other things” (1998, p. 26).

Recalling Mezirow's theory, disorienting dilemmas are often accompanied by feelings of fear, guilt, and shame. Certainly, confronted with the current ecological crisis, such feelings – and even dread – are natural and understandable. It would be an error, however, to attempt to *use* fear, guilt, or shame as a motivating force. Roszak has criticized the environmental movement for making this mistake. Accurate information about the crisis is essential, but encouraging guilt will inevitably prove to be counterproductive: “Shame always [has] been among the most unpredictable motivations in politics; it too easily slides into resentment. Call someone's entire

way of life into question, and what you are apt to produce is defensive rigidity” (Roszak, 1995, pp. 15-16). Ultimately, shame undermines trust – including our trust in our own selves – as well as the solidarity needed for effective transformative action.

Instead of appealing to guilt and fear – something which tends to close us in on ourselves and paralyze us – humans need to acknowledge their pain and use it as a starting point to recognize their fundamental connection with each other and with the greater community of life. We feel pain and fear in the face of our situation because we care, because we are connected with others. Educators must acknowledge painful emotions and affirm that people are essentially sensitive and compassionate while seeking to motivate through love, beauty, and awe. Macy & Brown’s (1998) “despairwork” provides a particularly insightful way of working through pain in a way analogous to grief work – with the key difference that here we are not trying to come to terms with a loss that has already occurred, but rather awaken ourselves to action aimed at preventing future harms.

Fostering Transformative Learning

The Tao concludes by exploring themes more explicitly focused on the question of fostering transformative learning through an “ecology of transformation.” Adapting Matthew Fox’s (1983) framework of creation spirituality, four “paths to liberation” are described which can serve as a foundation for a transformative praxis that both facilitates a shift in worldviews and inspires creative new forms of action. Unlike Mezirow’s (2000, 2009) classic ten steps, these processes are not understood as a linear progression, but rather as interrelated processes involved in deep transformative learning. While rational, critical thought plays a role, each path is holistic – involving intuitive, emotional, and somatic learning as well as more discursive processes.

The first path is that of *invocation*, of opening to the Tao, remembering our communion with other beings and the cosmos, and finding inspirational energy through beauty and awe. Cultivating mindfulness is the key goal of this process: We begin by attending to that which we love and then extend our awareness into other aspects of our lives. At another level, art, myth, and story can be employed to cultivate our awareness of the emerging story of the universe and foster an apprehension of the interconnection of all beings.

The second path is that of *letting go*, of embracing the void and clearing away the cobwebs of delusion that ensnare and disempower us. Macy’s “despairwork” process for moving from denial and despair, through pain, to connection and empowerment, is one example of this path. Meditation – be it a sitting practice, chanting, or forms of body movement – can also facilitate the process of emptying ourselves of preconceptions and predispositions, allowing a radical openness to new perspectives.

The third path, that of *creative empowerment*, focuses on reconnecting with the intrinsic power that enables us to see clearly and act decisively in the right way, at the right place, and at the right time, combining both intuition and compassion. Artistic processes may be used to liberate our imaginations. Processes may also be employed to become more conscious of “acausal” connections and synchronicities – for example contemplating dreams or using divination practices like the *I Ching*, either alone or with others – to cultivate intuitive discernment and become more aware of the dynamics of non-linear, complex causality in our work for integral transformation.

The fourth path is that of *incarnating the vision*, where we move from vision to embodiment to action. Creative visualization and body-based practices can play a role in this

path, as can work around vocation and right livelihood. The key to this path is the idea of combining traditional praxis-oriented processes with more intuitive/spiritual approaches.

Conclusions and Future Research

In the past, discussion on transformative learning has sometimes centred on whether it should be based primarily on critical social theory – with its emphasis of letting go of perspectives that have become outmoded through critical reflection – or whether an orientation from depth psychology focusing on emotional experiences of grief and loss are more important (Scott, 1997). While the four paths outlined above may seem to emphasize the extra-rational aspects closer to depth psychology, the approach of *The Tao* is better understood as an integration of both approaches with a third, cosmological component, which ultimately both includes and transcends the other aspects. *The Tao* shares David Selby's belief that "it is unlikely that environmental and global education can ever impact our culture unless we embrace a radical interconnectedness that revives mystery, a sense of the ineffable, the unknowable" (2002, p. 87). Similarly, it resonates with the idea that our learning must derive "from active engagement in practices that embody ecological values – connection, openness, generosity, appreciation, partnership, inquiry, dialogue, and celebration" (O'Sullivan & Taylor, 2004, p. 3).

The Tao of Liberation can serve as rich source of insight into transformative learning, providing a framework for further empirical research aimed at better understanding the processes involved in moving toward an ecological worldview. Over the course of the next few years, I will continue to study this further by interviewing participants involved in a variety of ecological education initiatives to explore the nature and process of worldview transformation. In so doing, I hope to discover new insights that can deepen our understanding of transformative learning and enhance its contribution to addressing the ecological crisis.

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