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Growing Still

REFLECTIONS ON THE INNER WORK DIALOGUE SERIES

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WOLFWILLOW
INSTITUTE FOR SYSTEMS LEARNING

“If you haven’t done the inner work that puts you into a position of being a humble and respectful person, then how are you going to shift big systems? It has to start with shifting this system right here.“

Melanie Goodchild, *The Promise of Healing*

Greetings fellow travelers, agents of change

If you are reading this, there is a strong possibility that your path has been shaped in irrevocable ways by a question that is living through you; a question that has informed pivotal choice points in your personal and professional life, nudged you toward new learning experiences, and inspired action. We are guessing that question is your version of the following:

In the time that we have, how do we make the kind of difference we really want to make?

You are not alone. The diverse group of individuals that have contributed to this document are a part of a similar, living inquiry called the *Transformational Leadership Node* (TLN). The TLN emerged from the social innovation field in Canada towards the end of 2018 and regularly convened interested practitioners for a collective, nuanced exploration of how

transformative change happens. Our intention was to deepen our understanding of the critical relationship between inner change in individuals and outer change in society. The creation of a series of virtual dialogues and this accompanying written piece was sparked by the interest expressed by the community to raise awareness and share learnings about how inner work strengthens leadership for change.

This document is intended to be a companion piece to the four Inner Work Dialogue video sessions that took place between fall 2019 and fall 2020 and the collective learning that came of listening to each other. The quotes and attributions you will read came from the minds and hearts of the folks who participated – real world leaders who have found inner work to be an essential lever in change work. This series included four 90-minute zoom sessions, recorded live with a moderator, and witnessed by a number of guest listeners. Each session broadly focused on the relationship between inner work and systems change, while narrowing in on one of four primary themes we had heard discussed in the wider group over two years' time.[1] These themes are as follows;

* Defining Inner Work
* Identity and The Stories We Tell
* The Promise of Healing
* Dwelling in Discomfort

Shared here are some patterns of meaning and understanding that wove within and across the Dialogues. The authors of this companion piece hold our reflections here with an open palm, aware that the lenses we look through shape what we see and are therefore, partial. Imbued throughout is an ethos of deep curiosity; *what do we sense, imagine, feel and think (SIFT) to be true – and how might we be wrong?* Whether you feel inner work is a critical and oft-overlooked intervention strategy, or woo-woo fluff, the invitation is to hold a similar spirit of curiosity. To that end, this document is not meant to be a definitive guide to inner work for social change but rather, to serve as a prompt for ongoing conversation, inquiry and collective sense-making.

More than ever, there is a shared sense that these demanding times urgently call for inner work as a key to impactful change leadership. To do this, we sense there is a need to deepen our collective understanding of inner work in at least three key areas. The first is to lift up the voices of many in the field who believe it critical for social change leaders to "keep the invisibles attached" – a practice that allows them to consciously build interior capacity.[2] Secondly, to respectfully examine a culture that marginalizes practitioners' inner work; to imagine together what might be gained of centering it for social change strategy and practice. And third, to explore various developmental pathways that catalyze the transformation of individuals, organizations, communities and systems.

What is Inner Work?

How Does it Relate to Change Strategies?

"If I'm trying to impact or change a system out there, I need to understand the levels at which the system lives in me."

Vanessa Reid, *Defining Inner Work*

Effective change makers learn how to bring awareness to the largely unseen connections between things, the invisible and dynamic interrelationships that characterize complexity. For many, this way of viewing the world requires a profound perceptual shift – a *systems sensibility* which involves an ongoing practice of looking deeper. Inner work is particularly relevant in complex change work because each actor is also a complex, and relational 'system' that benefits from a deeper look – not only for personal growth, but because such capacity-building can directly affect the impact a leader makes out in the world.

Across cultures, and throughout time, human beings have crafted song, image, story, and practices for the wanderer curious about the unseen dimension of their own being – the values, mindsets, beliefs, wounds and gifts that give rise to their way of knowing and doing. Defining Inner Work dialogue participant Julian Norris emphasized that, *"many of the things that we engage in as inner work, whether it's contemplative practice or reflective practice or becoming more aware of our habitual thought patterns, have been held by Daoist sages, by Buddhist meditators, by philosophers and alchemists and artists and characters, martial artists and mystics across the ages and often in small pockets."* During the Inner Work Dialogue series, we explored how each speaker defined inner work, how each understood the role of inner work as it relates to outer systems change, and what wisdom traditions or core life experiences have formed these understandings. Speakers shared their personal thoughts, meaning-imbued processes and models born of culture, of life experience, of academia and of insight. A few strong themes emerged;

Inner work is happening all the time. When invited to define inner work, many panelists in the dialogues said something along the lines of; "*what isn't inner work?"* Consciously or unconsciously, we all have interior voices and operating procedures that shape our intentions, perspectives, reactions and, ultimately, our actions. Inner work for system leadership is a process of questioning and becoming conscious of these inner dynamics; building motivation and finding practices to intentionally shape them to more skillfully meet complexity.

Inner work is practice. It is not a destination with known arrival coordinates, but an ongoing, non-linear process that asks for dedicated time and attention. The doorways in are varied – sometimes intuitive, sometimes learned; ancient and rooted in tradition or new and unique to a community or individual, born of a specific context, time, or developmental edge.

Inner work increases our internal complexity. Over time, it allows us to see more than what we could before, gain nuanced perspective and awareness, heal our wounds, manage our egos, challenge our privilege, hold paradox, see in shades of grey. This increase in complexity allows us to better meet the complexity of the world with resilience and effective skills. We gain capacity to make wise choices – better equipped to creatively respond, rather than react.[3]

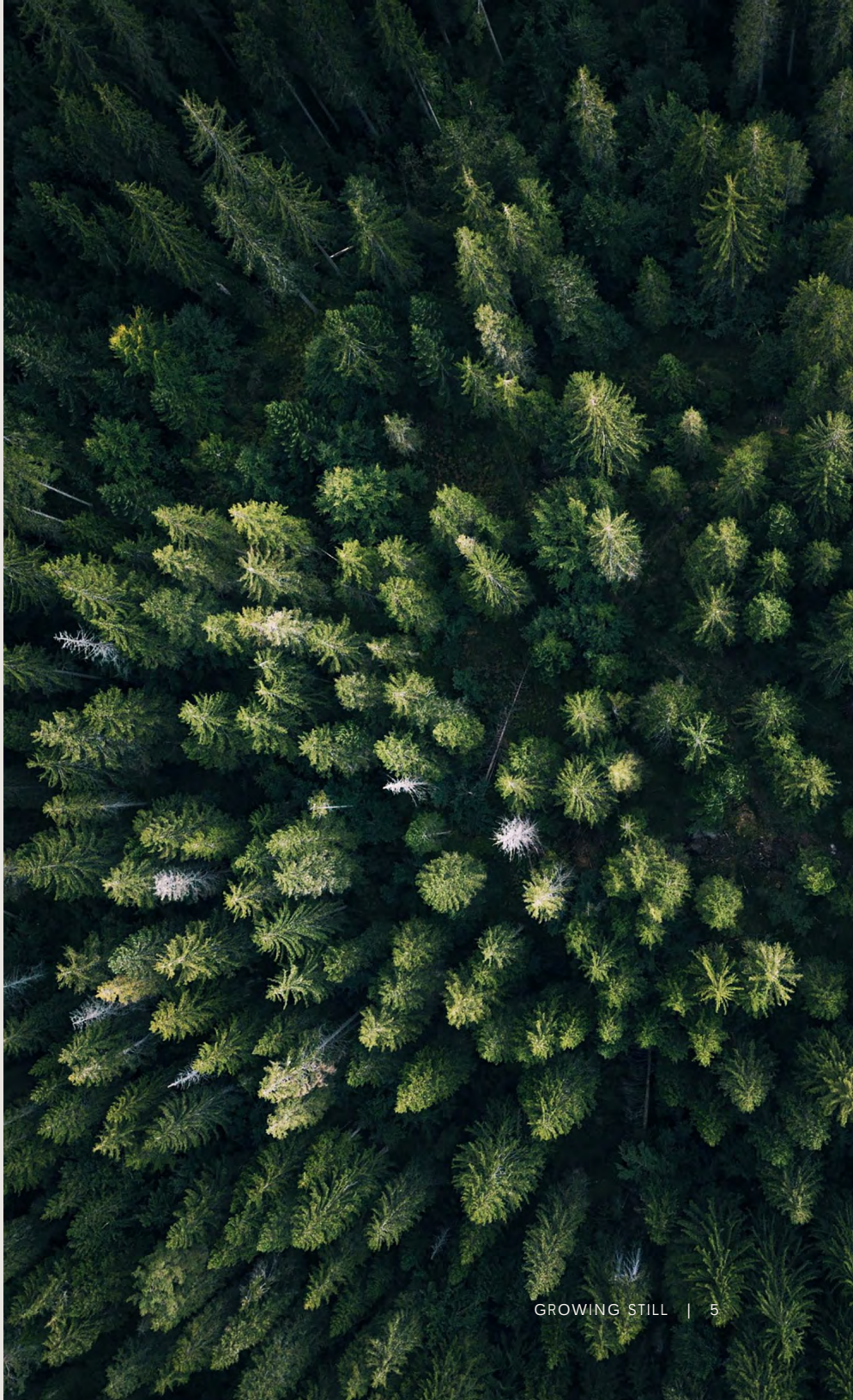
Inner work engages mystery. It is a way of touching that which is greater; the profound mysteries of life and death, called by many names across many traditions – Spirit, Universe, Soul, God, Oneness, Nature, Self. Many expressed how their practice of inner work involves cultivating a belief that mysterious support is available for the asking, especially in the midst of uncertainty or overwhelm – petitions for help from sources such as ancestors, art, dreams and the energy of the natural world.

Inner work is relational. The practice of inner work invites entry into relationship with various parts or dimensions of ourselves and others. We learn to engage in relationship in more courageous and authentic ways with a broader spectrum of individuals, the systems we long to shift, with the land, our vocation, and with lineage. In many cases, our relationships become the practice ground for inner work.

Inner work is a collective endeavor. Despite a cultural drive towards individualism, inner work is a journey best supported, enriched, and catalyzed in communion with place and community. In system change leadership, we practice inner work that strengthens our capacity to tap into the collective wisdom of a field with curiosity. We turn to whichever practices work for us and pose questions, to ourselves and to others, such as; *what is trying to emerge? What is the intelligence of the system trying to tell us? What wisdom is here, shared by all?*

Inner work is about our whole selves. Regular engagement in inner work practice can translate into the acceptance and reintegration of all our various 'selves'. Being more whole, we let our gifts shine, we commit, we create, we ask different questions and are open to unexpected answers. Importantly, we become more aware of personal biases, less-than-useful patterns and painful wounds – not as aspects of ourselves that must be resolved before daring to step forward, but accepted as focal points for ongoing learning and healing.

Inner work is activism. It is political. To show up as whole people, with our hearts and imaginations and minds connected and in-tact, is a radical change act in and of itself. Because inner work inspires a deeper perception and awareness, practitioners are better able to see and give voice to structures of oppression, and the damaging dominant narratives that constrain, label, and separate. Thereby, these leaders are more fully equipped to consciously shift those narratives within and without. Tahia Ahmed in The Stories We Tell dialogue offered us the following evocative insight; "*what I've come to understand of inner work is that I know I'm doing* [it] *when I can stay in my awareness about the fact that there's actually no separation between my inner and outer work.* [Systems of oppression] *literally bank on us to create that divide between our inner and outer worlds. They do everything that they can to keep those two things separate within ourselves and within our communities.*"



What Provokes Inner Work?

Context, Calls & Catalysts: We Can't Avert Our Eyes

"Anytime we're struggling, we're in pain, we're confused, [or] we're overwhelmed, there are inner resources that can be powerful for us."

Kate Sutherland, *The Promise of Healing*