Transformation Literacy to Transformative Unity: A Noble Experiment From Me to We

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This case study shares our learning journey while co-creating The Mindfulness Alliance, a non-profit committed to catalyzing collective capacity to foster awareness-based social change. The paper explores our contemplative governance development through the lens of the me-to-We *journey, the shift from an* ego-centric *to an* eco-centric worldview. We present our 4C framework as a means to better understand this inner journey and the essential awareness-based* transformation literacies *that we need to cultivate in order to meet urgent intra- and interdependent societal challenges. We explain the me-to-We journey as a journey toward* transformative unity, *a new term which explicates the type of interdependent unity needed to change the world. We introduce* The Cycle of Transformative Unity, *an emergent awareness-based model which incorporates the concept of toroidal flow to support understanding the 4C change processes as the constantly unfolding, nonlinear, interdependent journey from me-to-We. These models (1) give rise to new ways of thinking and teaching about the journey of growing awareness, (2) have implications for the evolution of practice frameworks and trainings, and (3) offer insights for the creation of educational spaces that are relevant to educators, leaders, practitioners, and change-makers in any arena. The article advocates for intentionally growing the capacity for awareness and the capacity for connectedness, to foster the transformative unity needed for broad social change. We are each called upon to dare greatly, and to reimagine a just way forward—together.*

As we face multifaceted challenges in our changing world, we must attend to the pervasive cultural and systemic crises of our time—inequity, injustice, and inhumanity. The coercive limiting force of Western cultural conditioning in the United States (Schien, 2016) promulgates an individualistic, self-centered, competitive orientation predicated upon a scarcity mindset. This mindset is expressed systemically through policies, procedures, and protocols, engendering and normalizing hierarchy, domination, and separation throughout our organizations and communities (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Stelmach et al., 2010). Higher education systems are no exception. However, they are particularly poised to disrupt and transform this mindset, as incubators of cultural norms, and generators of social change (Bhat, 2016; Chakraborty et al., 2018).

In the search for a more inclusive, equitable, and just way forward, many people openly question the past and future of higher education, and advocate for educating the populace in a different way. As Robinson-Morris (2022) explains, "Perhaps, we have finally reached the limits of our passive acceptance and are irresistibly compelled to act, to force a reckoning, to begin to *radically reimagine*…by first transforming ourselves." This transformation requires a reimagining of the unexamined individual and collective constructs that propel current ways of doing and being, and a radical interrogation of our interiors to illuminate the inner scaffolding that underpins the construction of our identities, our co-created systems, and Western culture as a whole. This type of transformative introspection is built upon awareness[1].

The cultivation of self-awareness and the accessing of inner knowledge is an epistemological challenge in higher education. Most institutions are firmly grounded in "outer" knowledge, in rational third person ways of knowing based on the scientific method, quantifiable evidence, and intellectual reasoning (Bowers, 2002; Lin, 2013). As such, "inner" knowledge, first person knowledge based on experience, insight, and

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1   We align with Dahl et al.'s (2020) definition of "awareness" as a heightened and flexible attentiveness to perceptual impressions in one's environment, as well as internal cues, such as bodily sensations, thoughts, and emotions. States of heightened awareness are thus typified by being fully aware of what one is doing, whom one is with, and of one's own internal states (p. 2).

embodied sensing, tends to be undervalued in academia. Thus, the cultivation of awareness through mindfulness-based approaches is often not viewed as a practical pedagogical tool. Although awareness is noted as an important 21st century skill in education (Keeling, 2004), and mindfulness-based practices have been increasingly incorporated into higher education settings over the past few decades (Bush, 2011), the cultivation and use of awareness remains an underdeveloped asset in the world of education.

It is becoming increasingly understood that systems cannot be transformed unless we also transform the quality of the awareness that we apply to our individual and collective actions (Scharmer & Kaeufer, 2015). Thus, accessing the generative power of awareness, and leveraging its subsequent inner knowledge, is a necessity if we are to create a self and society that is radically reimagined and transforms the way individuals and institutions live in the world, and in so doing ultimately transforms the world we live in. To meet these challenges, inner knowledge and their related skills need to go beyond a *me-focused* application, to a *We-focused* application. Social change leader Otto Scharmer (2019; 2021a) asserts that fostering this "me-to-We" shift requires the development of *transformation literacy*, to become literate enough to understand what it takes for an individual to transform from *ego*-system awareness to *eco*-system awareness. However, transformation literacy is still a blind spot in our educational systems (Scharmer, 2019). Educators need to combine teaching both the practices and processes of inner transformation, with the practices and processes for outer transformation, if we are to realize the "more beautiful world our hearts know is possible" (Eisenstein, 2013).

Therefore, how do we:

1. Determine the types of transformative introspection needed to transcend our cultural trance in order to foster the movement from me-to-We?
2. Leverage our inner knowledge to move beyond outmoded ways of operating toward more holistic, interconnected functioning, in order to form more just structures, and center collective wellbeing?

3. Develop the transformation literacy needed to meet our urgent intra- and interdependent societal challenges?

We held these questions at the heart of our co-creative journey for the past five years, aligned with Rilke's (1929) reminder to live the questions in order to someday live the answers. Our nine-member group are women and men ranging in age from our 30s to our 70s, members of the LGBTQ+ and Black communities, people with disabilities, a variety of ethnic and socioeconomic class backgrounds, diverse contemplative traditions, and work experiences from education and mental healthcare to business and law. This case study shares insights from our aspirational journey of leaning into and living into the answers.

We share how our collective intentions and commitments to awareness-based social change led to the forming of a nonprofit, The Mindfulness Alliance. We present our evolving understanding of the me-to-We journey as a journey of connectedness, and share insights regarding the me-work required in doing interconnected "We-work." We delineate the practices and processes we used for creating new ways of organizing, for challenging our inner and outer inherited structures, and for building our connectedness. Also shared are the conceptual tools that emerged, including the development of our framework, named "The 4Cs," which underlies the journey from me-to-We. We outline the principles, practices, and processes of The 4Cs, and define them as important awareness-based literacies of transformation. We further explain the me-to-We journey as a movement toward *transformative unity*, a new concept we define as the type of interdependent unity[2] needed to change the world. We also share how this insight led to the emergence of a comprehensive awareness-based model we introduce herein as the *Cycle of Transformative Unity*. This model incorporates the concept of toroidal flow, the dynamic flow of energy in all living things (Gin, 2016), to support understanding the 4C change processes as the constantly unfolding, nonlinear, interdependent journey from me-to-We. Although this work is in its infancy, we believe the time is right to

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2   We align with Kohut's (2021) definition of "unity" as the connection that allows for the mutual motion of micro and macro systems to coalesce as one unit. This understanding is based on the Unity Principle, which asserts that the universe (reality) is dialectical (relational).

share the spark it has ignited within us, as a means for deepening the discourse about the unique role of awareness in social transformation.

In a prior issue (Napora, 2017), we discussed how the power of awareness and power of community are essential ingredients in the recipe for social change. Soon after publication, a clarified vision emerged among our group:

> *Together, we can catalyze our collective capacity to foster awareness-based social change in order to co-create a more just, compassionate, inclusive society.*

This magnetic calling became the purpose and goals for forming a nonprofit, in service to the heartfelt questions shared above. Our journey became an awareness-based experiment in co-creation, learning to transcend inherited structures, to envision new ways of organizing both within and outside the higher education setting, and to allow new collective practices and inner knowledge processes to emerge in order to live into the answers to our questions. We began fondly referring to this process as our "noble experiment."

The following four sections outline the 4C framework, comprised of the four "C-words" *Catalyst, Collective, Capacity,* and *Change,* which represent dimensions of change. These four C-words serve as placeholders for processes and related literacies. As literacies, they comprise awareness-based knowledge and competencies required for inner and outer change. Although presented here in a sequence, The 4Cs represent the nonlinear path of change, unfolding transformation. The Cs never stand alone; they are interconnected, recursive, flowing processes. We highlight components of our organizational development exploration through the lens of the 4C framework to illustrate how these conceptual tools and literacies emerged through living our practice. We share this journey as our attempt to live the me-to-We journey, to reimagine, and live into what is possible, together.

Catalyst: Igniting The Spark

Our vision for change sparked an exploration into the notion of *cultural evolution.* Specifically, an evolution which is part of a larger social movement from *ego*-centric to more *eco*-centric worldviews (Sharm-

er, 2009)—a shift from a self-centered orientation, to a more collective wellbeing-centered orientation. This type of paradigm shift is being fostered within many fields of human endeavor, including education, as some reorient and aspire to bring more holistic, integrative, connective, nature-based, eco-friendly approaches into being. In order for this broader cultural evolution to take place, we must expand our perceptual lens beyond the aperture of externality, to also include internality as a valuable resource for knowledge and wisdom. If we align with Palmer's (2011) assertion that structures are manifestations of a long history of the dynamics of the human heart, then our initial shift must begin deep *within* each of us. Thus, we need a shift in consciousness, or an "upgrade in our operating system" (Scharmer, 2018). We understood this upgrade to mean engaging in the inner work of knowing thyself. Therefore, the intention to transcend our limits through introspection became the ground of our collective work. We engaged in individual and collective practices that could help us transcend the limits of our inherited internal and external structures[3]. Organizational development centered around designing and engaging in collective awareness-based practices that could tap into our inner knowing and reservoirs of unmanifest transformative potential. This inspired and informed new ways of functioning and brought new structures to life. These ideas served as the catalyst for reimagining ways of being and doing together, driving our organizational development forward. We began to pay attention to the catalytic energy at play in our co-creative work.

In the 4C framework, the first "C" is *Catalyst*—whether it be a spark, a nudge, a tickle of thought, it is a mix of emergence and pull, an arising impulse seeking expression. Heeding this call requires space for present moment awareness to recognize, and oftentimes suspend judgment of, the catalytic arising itself. It requires observing and sensing our own mind and body, intentionally returning to our own inner depths. Jon Kabat-Zinn (2013) refers to this type of practice as *dropping-in*. Regularly and repeatedly, dropping-in over time enabled us to be more mindful of the "what" and the "why" of our collective decision-making process-

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3   For a more detailed description of inherited internal and external structures see Napora (2017).

es. Gradually, the dropping-in approach intuitively evolved from an individual practice to a *collective* practice and process. When catalytic energy bubbled up, often expressed as a new idea, we consistently and intentionally took the time to (1) check in with each person's sensing, (2) challenge ourselves to notice, but not react to, an urge to action, (3) actively question the implications of potential action without labeling the initiating energy as good or bad, and (4) make a conscious effort to disentangle the initial spark from the speaker to support depersonalization and dispassionate discussion. We danced with the ebb and flow of our shifting capacity to live this practice in action, committed to live our beloved questions in order to live into their answers.

We leaned into, and held space for, our core questions so that we might develop a contemplative governance structure—an awareness-based approach to organizing, managing, and being in just relationship—that supports wholeness, centers collective wellbeing, and fosters the co-creation of more just structures. For us, living into this inquiry meant that awareness, awareness-based practices, and inner knowledge were not only valued for their inherent worth, they were intentionally positioned as the foundational ground of all aspects of organizational development—its processes, procedures, practices, and emerging forms. To this end, we realized that what we do is less important than how we do it, because the *process is the product*. This awareness guided our way forward, keeping us focused on our commitments to the inner and outer aspects of transcendent intentions, and the embodied investigation of our emerging experiment.

Norms & Forms

One spark that emerged was the aspiration to collectively function in nonhierarchical ways, with no one person holding authority, and by utilizing collective decision-making processes. It became clear that the impulse to experiment with disrupting and deconstructing hierarchy lived deep in our bodies. We were comforted by the current trend away from traditional hierarchies and their replacement with new organizational forms (Billinger & Workiewicz, 2019). But, questions remained. How to dismantle hierarchy in the legal space of a 501c3 nonprofit organiza-

tion? How to work with our inherited and embodied hierarchical ways of thinking, doing, and being, in a more liberated way?

Holding our focus on the *process*, on the *how*, as essential, brought a *form and function* challenge to light. The existing structures and *forms* of society, embedded in systems, institutions and organizations, hold the standards, the norms, and the rules of engagement dictating how we are to *function*. United States law requires any non-profit to form a Board of Directors, and the prescribed board structure is inherently hierarchical. We used the analytical lenses of *form* and *function* to disentangle board *form* from board *function*, and to question the inherited hierarchical structure and mode of functioning. If the intention of board formation is to ensure that requisite responsibilities are carried out, then does the execution of such functions need to be carried out in a hierarchical fashion? Taking that question into reflection and discussion brought us face-to-face with the constraints of the social conditioning alive within each of us. Challenging normative social structures elicits parallel inner challenges. Challenging our inner narratives requires that we first challenge our beliefs and ideals in order to understand the reality of the situation (Fritz & Anderson, 2016).

Early discussions were difficult, full of opinion and tempered reactivity in defense of adhering to certain seemingly immovable forms. When faced with the uncertainty of straying from a societal norm, the discomfort and fear elicited was palpable. We challenged ourselves to examine what was arising within each of us, to hold our minds and emotions steady, and to draw on our *collective* agency to make bold decisions. Bristo (2020) regards the activation of agency, our individual and collective capacity for intentional action, as essential to successfully respond to the challenges of our urgent times. We decided to call ourselves the Founding Members, instead of identifying as a "Board," to help dismantle notions of hierarchy. We realized we could comply with the minimum requirements of the *form* of a non-profit permissible by law by naming a Chair, Treasurer, and Secretary, while still executing the board's *function*, in a different way.

Faced with the challenge of changing hierarchical functioning meant we needed to acknowledge that, inherently, we were part of

the challenge. To transform the function meant we had to transform ourselves. Therefore, our aspirational decision to transcend hierarchical ways of doing and being needed to move beyond the realms of declaration and idealistic thinking into the realm of intentional action. Clearly, to disrupt and deconstruct embodied expressions of hierarchical functioning requires steadfast awareness, dedication, and the activation of both individual and collective agency. We dedicated ourselves to challenging the status quo, heeding the spark to transcend our limits. We were learning the importance of staying focused on the *process*. We continually re-centered our attention on *awareness* and *inner knowledge* as sources for liberatory insight. We grew in our capacity to tease apart form from function, and use this analytical tool to discover spaces to renew our own freedom within the limits of conventional language and standard operating procedures. What became essential was our dedication to prioritizing the time, being patient, and engaging in the intentional collective practices needed to allow the spark of the possible to grow in the fire of relational wellbeing. Continuing our noble experiment living into our core questions led us further in our exploration of cultural evolution, from *Catalyst* to *Collective*, the ongoing journey from me-to-We.

Collective: Building Connectedness

What can be accomplished by people acting as a coherent group? In our 4C framework, the second "C," *Collective*, is a powerful force as it takes the baton of energetics from the Catalyst phase. It is the force that grows an initiative or movement, gathering introspective resources, and harnessing them with the resources of others. We began this phase with a deeper exploration into how the shift from me-to-We could be fostered. We recognized that this shift would require letting go of a small world me-focus, and opening into a We-focused viewpoint. This approach resources interconnection and inter-reliance, and grows our understanding of the transformative power of We. Kabat-Zinn (2021) speaks of interconnectedness, reminding us "each one of us is the cells of the one body of the planet. And when it becomes we, rather than me, that's a very healing direction to go in." We pondered how we could

collectively support this shift within the context of our contemplative governance processes.

This led to the realization that we had been operating under the *unspoken* assumption that we are bringing our best contemplative selves to the table. But how was that to be defined, so that we could all hold the same understanding and expectations? The clearest way forward was to engage in a norming process, to co-create an agreement for how we would support our transformative intentions. Some organizations use established agreements, or statements, that norm the intentions of the group field, and begin to establish organizational culture (Ghosh et al., 2019). However, our group decided to engage in the co-creation process ourselves, drawing on our inner knowing, and the catalytic energy in our collective space.

Collective Intentions

Our iterative agreement-making process spanned five months. We reflected on the concepts of being, doing and becoming, and what we were learning, which led to the emergence of the following questions:

- What are our agreements, intentions, and collective commitments?

- How will we be with one another to sustain and support presence?

We generated a list of intentions. Each Founding Member shared what arose within. Sharing focused on what values we would honor and acknowledge in the collective space, including everyone's gifts, diverse spirituality, and the inherent tension in the process of collaborating. Other tenets were awareness-based qualities and capacities, such as self-awareness, vulnerability, acceptance, non-judgment, kindness, and compassion. As we progressed, we also explored what impedes the expression of awareness-based qualities. We generated a list of what we refer to as our "defaults, arisings, or contractions," forms of expression that could be counterproductive and distractive. As we listed these shadow[4] aspects, we laughed at its length! Familiar companions like

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4   In this paper, we refer to the "shadow" as the parts of ourselves that are difficult to look at or even name, in alignment with Petty et al., 2017.

criticism, defensiveness, impatience, personalization, judgment, and righteousness were shared. Through this process, an idea emerged as a way to work with our lists of intentions and contractions. We would refer to them as the *Green Lens* (cultivating) and *Red Lens* (letting go) qualities, respectively. Our final product, our Founding Agreements, is shared in Figure 1.

Figure 1

The Mindfulness Alliance Founding Agreements

1. Cultivate an atmosphere of safety 2. Build trust with one another 3. Learn to hear one another's stories 4. Honor everyone's gifts 5. Foster and honor flow 6. Recognize and honor diverse spirituality (inclusivity) 7. Foster collective leadership 8. Speak in terms of possibilities instead of problems	9. Support the 'ouch' process 10. Trust the process 11. Acknowledge the inherent tension in this process 12. Actively engage self-awareness; sustain and support Presence; awareness of the 'inner' 13. Hold ourselves accountable to the agreements

CULTIVATING QUALITIES (GREEN LENS)		LETTING GO (RED LENS)	
Nonjudgment Kindness, Compassion Presence Balance Ground/Stability Honesty Respect Speak Your Truth Self-Care	Acceptance Vulnerability Openness (Curiosity, Possibility) Joy Gratitude Integrity Transparency Stillness, Silence Dispassion	Worry, Anxiety, Fear Defensiveness Self-suppression Impatience (Anger) Exhaustion, Distraction Seriousness Judgment Dismissiveness Attachment, Clinging Perfectionism/The Ideal Need to Be Right Criticism–Of Others and Self Over-Excitement–Push, Over-extension Expectation–Should, Must, Have to	Passion and Use of Force Either/Or–Black and White Thinking Personalization, Personal Attacks Over Concern with Productivity, Activity, and Strategy Excessive Time Consciousness Superiority, Condescension Righteousness, One Right Way

Co-creating our Founding Agreements served as a bonding experience. One member observed how the process served as a sort of adhesive connective piece in the group. The process fostered relationship-building and deepened our understanding of one another. The next step was to move our Agreements from the domain of abstraction into application, to make them into a *living practice* that would support and maintain the intentions behind their creation. We decided to begin

each meeting reciting the Founding Agreements aloud. This ritualized process involved each Founding Member taking turns reading each agreement aloud, in order, including the green lens cultivating qualities. The unspoken red lens items remained as a reminder of what we did not want to create.

The recitation of our Founding Agreements became an anchor for our We-work, a meaningful ritual that recommits us to the principles that bind us to our work and to each other. One member explained how the Agreements serve as a container in which we hold ourselves accountable to one another, creating the environment and space in which we can perform at our best and most collaboratively. It also helps us to "keep the ego out." The Agreements remind us to check ourselves, be aware of how we are interacting in the moment, and hold our focus on *how we relate*. They provide opportunities to practice social awareness, the ability to accurately notice the emotions of others and "read" situations effectively (Goleman, 1995). They position relationality and wellbeing at the center of organizational governance. The gathering of inner resources as reflected in our Founding Agreements, and recitation process, reaffirms the individual power we each have to choose how to be in just relationship with ourselves and with others. In other words, how *We-work* requires the *me-work*.

Me-work requires expanding our skills, learning new strategies, and learning to differentiate knowing that takes place in the inner world from knowing taking place in the outer world. Emanuel Swedenborg (2012) once said that the inner self is as distinct from the outer self as heaven is from earth. However, knowing thyself also involves creating support structures that enable and inspire us to engage in deep me-work. Support structures need to make it safe to be human together, so we can address our inner lives. As Williams (as cited in Petty et al., 2017) so aptly describes, "not addressing these shadows compassionately and directly can stall or limit the depth of the collective embodiment we are seeking to advance our work" (para. 33). We found circle processes to be the safe container we needed to support our commitments to introspection, and to endure the inherent discomfort of "going deep."

Circles of Support

Circle practices are ancient social processes with many lineages that have been adapted into modern methodologies for communicating and organizing (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015). Circles convey equity, safety, and trust, and create a conversational space where everyone has responsibility in the outcome and process (Zehr, 2015). In 2019, our group began incorporating a community circle process into our work. Inherent in any circle process is that one person speaks at a time, and the opportunity to speak moves in one direction around the circle. Each person must wait to speak until his or her turn, and no one may interrupt.

Palmer (1998) reminds us, this journey from me-to-We, from independent to interconnected, begins in our hearts as a "capacity for connectedness—a capacity to resist the forces of disconnection with which our culture and our psyches are riddled" (para. 2). In service to growing the capacity for connectedness, we began each circle practice with a *relationship round* followed by a *values round*, using specific personal questions. For example, one relational question was *When was the last time you sang to yourself or someone else?* A values-based question was *What do you value about contemplative practices?* We circled in this way at the beginning of each meeting for several months. Instead of following impersonal efficiency-focused meeting models, we took the time necessary to till the inner ground, grow trust and openness, and generate the collective conditions for capacity building. Trust and a willingness to be vulnerable are prerequisites for authentic participation in this type of process. Trust was, and still is, a central pillar of our noble experiment, both trust in one another and trust in our collective processes.

As we progressed with our circle work, "circling" itself became a method for supporting our governing decisions, and a foundational tool for our contemplative governance processes. Circle practice provided an important social infrastructure. Coming together in a different meeting structure supported our ability to be different together. In other words, the different *form* activated the potential for a different *function*. Members remarked on the alignment of circling principles with our

intentions to center relationality and wellbeing, and to foster just relationships. They shared how circles support equality among us giving us each the space to talk, the opportunity to be heard, or the opportunity to pass. These practices embody the intention that everyone's voice is equally important. Circling also invited us to be patient, and engage in active listening and mindful decorum, practices that enhanced our ability to live our Agreements, to do our inner work, and to grow our collective capacity, together.

      Catalyzing our collective capacity for change became our mantra, our process, the alpha and the omega of the Founding Members' work. We were growing in our collective understanding of the generative power of undertaking inner work together. We were building our capacity for connectedness and strengthening the social latticework, the invisible infrastructure of our connections, which form the foundations of change (Napora, 2017). Simultaneously, our understanding of how We-work could catalyze the capacity of individuals and groups for a more just world was expanding. The resources of the Collective center the individual and the group in a generative movement forward and create a safe practice container as we deepen into the third C—*Capacity*—on our transformative journey from me-to-We.

Capacity: Deepening Commitments

Capacity, the third aspect of the 4C journey, emphasizes the deepening of awareness-based practices. Deeper practice means deepening relationships, both with oneself and with others. This can foster a profound shift in mindset, from a *me-mindset* to a *We-mindset*. A We-mindset encompasses a broad range of values including collaboration, non-transactional relating, inclusivity, and interconnection. Systems theorist Donella Meadows (1999) identified the mindset or paradigm out of which the system—its goals, power structure, rules, and culture—arises, as the most powerful leverage point for change. Thus, shifting into a We-mindset can foster the emergence of new goals, new rules, new ways of relating with power, and thereby transform systems and cultures. Cultivating a We-mindset is essential for engaging in deep collaborative We-work. We-work moves us beyond an individual focus toward improving the

system(s) we are part of, and expanding the focus toward social change. The deepening of our inner work flows into outer change.

Inner work practice is the "work" we decide to do within ourselves in order to do this same work within organizations. Practicing essential inner work enables us to do the "outer work" of social transformation and justice. Awareness-based practices can help us embody ways of being and doing that align with the systems and cultures we wish to see in the world.

> Like…the trees in a forest…our ability to create mean-
> ingful change as an ecosystem depends on our ability
> to embody and reflect the transformation we wish to
> see inside ourselves *at the same time* we embody it in
> the systems around us. (Petty et al., 2017, para. 10)

The more we practice, the more we grow our understanding of the generative and reciprocal relationship between inner and outer change. We come to understand that our deep inner work is the heart bringing change out into the world.

Inner Work of Social Justice

Another important deepening we participated in centered on social justice[5]. Capacity is about deepening one's repertoire of practice and of understanding, especially with *social* understanding. The inner work of social justice requires us not to shy away from hard topics and difficult acts of grace, but to move towards them and embrace them in order to live into our full capacity for real and meaningful change. We questioned our *collective* understanding of justice-related issues. We recognized that we had to deepen our capacity and collective awareness of the issues before we could begin to support the work of repairing collective harm. Moving our inner work into the "We-space" was needed. Acknowledging that the hole in our collective social justice knowledge could not be filled easily, we decided to dedicate ongoing meetings to

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5   We define "social justice" in comprehensive terms, as the return to balance of oppressed groups. This perspective is based on the work of The National SEED Project (2021).

our own edification of diversity, equity, and inclusion, beginning with an exploration of topics in the broad areas of racism, white privilege, and cultural appropriation (King, 2018; McIntosh, 1995).

Over several months, we engaged in deep discussions on these delicate and complex topics. One justice-based process that emerged was an "ouch[6]" (King, 2018) process. Our "ouch" process was designed to support our commitment to our Founding Agreements. It allowed us to consider the *intent* versus the *impact* of our communication in the moment (Walton et al., 2013). The following initial ideas were generated:

- If an Agreement is broken, or someone has defaulted into a red lens mode, "ouch" can be stated

- "Ouch" can be stated by the person feeling the ouch, or by someone else who is feeling a tension in the room

- Group agrees to pause, breathe, and hold space for an "ouch" discussion

- Best if the "ouch" is processed in that moment

- Purpose is to clarify intention/impact, and support re-establishing group stability, cohesion, and flow

The "ouch" process embeds an intentional pause into the collective space, which provides the opportunity to join in a healing process. A *pause process* can help to deepen clarity and stability around the harm (King, 2018). Any inadvertent negative impact from misaligned comments or actions are addressed directly, in the moment, lest we continue to unwittingly perpetuate harm. Remen (1997) tells us "[t]he reality is that healing happens between people. The wound in me evokes the healer in you, and the wound in you evokes the healer in me, and then as the two healers, we collaborate" (para. 5). One Founding Member shared how being the subject of the "ouch" process confirmed for him the depth of relationship and trust within the group. He could be called out and feel good about it. The "ouch" process continues to be an important component of our contemplative governance. We know

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6   The development of our "ouch" process was inspired by Ruth King's (2018) guidance on how to talk about what disturbs you (pp. 177-188).

that ongoing education and collective engagement are requisite capacity building endeavors when co-creating and embodying the more just and equitable world we long for.

Interdependence & We-Mindset

This journey from me-to-We also involves deepening our understanding of our inherent interdependence. The view that we live in a profoundly and radically connected world is growing in our collective awareness. Interdependence has become an increasingly important framework for understanding how environmental, economic, and political ecosystems function (Coate, et al., 2017). Interdependence means really knowing in our bodies that we are not separate from that which is around us (Salzberg, 2014). It reveals how everything in life is a series of causes and conditions in a vast web of causality. As part of this web, our inner world continually interacts with the outer world to create a bounded sense of interdependence. However, this integral dance of connection is often ignored, and its importance underestimated. For example, we might hold a We-mindset, but not be fully aware of the ways in which it is bounded. We might see the impact of interdependence alive in our life, but not appreciate the limitations of that view to how interdependence affects us personally, as individuals. Deep inner work is needed to reveal our embodied limitations to inclusivity, which limits our sense of interdependence, if we are to fully realize our interdependence on a vast scale. As Dorje (2017) elucidates, "Recognizing the full extent of interdependence will lead to a fundamental rethinking of who we are as human beings and of our place in the world we help create" (p. 14).

Daring Greatly

Understanding that we needed extended time with each other to support deep inner work and practice, we decided to incorporate retreats into our repertoire of contemplative governance tools. For us, retreat intentions were not focused in the traditional realms of organizational efficiency, productivity, and effectiveness (Malvicini & Serrat, 2017). We maintained our focus on deep inner work, growing our capacity for

connectedness, relationality, wellbeing, and expanding our sense of interdependence. The retreat space served as a practice field, a safe environment where we could practice new behaviors together (Scharmer, 2021b). We understood that we each needed to become Roosevelt's (1910) *Man in the Arena*, "who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly" (para. 8).

We began meeting in retreat three times a year. Community circle processes became a key support for just relating and space-holding, which fostered the latticework of our engagement and transformational aspirations. In the circle, we dared to be vulnerable with one another, open our hearts, and speak our truth. For example, the question *What demonstrates respect?* elicited a variety of responses including listening, agreeing, patience, to be fully seen, heard and recognized, to be accepted in wholeness, to not be trampled, and compassion. This helped us to see one another more clearly, to acknowledge diverse perspectives instead of unconsciously projecting our own needs, and to foster regard, and harmonious relations.

"Retreating" in service to, and gratitude for, one another became an important structure for our contemplative governance. It supported our transcendent intentions and collective commitment to daring greatly. Holding regular retreats allowed for deep discussion, to deepen our practice, and to build our collective capacity. Retreats help us stay committed to both the me-work and the We-work. As Bockler (2021) echoes, "For awareness-based social change facilitators, first-person research thus becomes a life practice, focused on investigating the dynamics of social change by making a daily commitment to attend to the living dynamics within" (p. 31). It takes unwavering commitment, wherewithal, tenacity, grace, humility, and daring, to engage in deep inner work in the space of the collective. As Palmer (1998) so accurately describes, "After the first flush of romance, community is less like a garden and more like a crucible. One stays in the crucible only if one is committed to being refined by fire" (para. 6). The transformative fire of communal inner work is the catalytic ground needed to expand a We-mindset,

grow a sense of interdependence, and catalyze the collective capacity for change. We continued our noble experiment, moving from Capacity to the fourth C—*Change*—on our exploratory 4C journey from me-to-We.

Change: Transforming Self & Society

Change in the 4C framework involves cultivating awareness, gathering resources, and deepening collective inner work, in service to the transformation of self and society. Transformative change can only happen when we change the way we see ourselves, others, as well as the capacity of our collective intentions.

> When we serve, we know that we belong to life and to that purpose. From the perspective of service, we are all connected: All suffering is like my suffering and all joy is like my joy. The impulse to serve emerges naturally and inevitably from this way of seeing. (Remen, 1999, para. 2)

There is a redundancy and a reiteration to change. As individuals and collectives we are always in the process of changing (Walker et al., 2006), although, arguably, we are not always in service. Therefore, we need to be intentional that our collective impact is grounded in service, service that is selfless, interdependent, and allows what is emerging to flow into manifestation.

Selfless service requires discipline to engage in practices that challenge the attitudes, beliefs, and ideals that veil our inherently self-centered orientation and thwart our connective intentions. Cultivating a We-mindset facilitates our journey toward interdependence. Interdependence recognizes that your wholeness is my wholeness, is life's wholeness. Manifestation for what wants to emerge requires being in just relationship with oneself and with others. We drop-into ourselves, and drop-into the group field. This individual and collective alignment in the We-space creates an interstitial connective tissue, the invisible social latticework of our connectedness. The coherence of the group field supports a shift in our operating systems, creating a stable ground

through which our collective intentions can manifest. In this way, aspirational visions and reimagining can move from our individual minds and hearts into collective embodiment, and be brought into existence.

When service is embodied with selflessness, discipline, and interdependence, it becomes an approach that is strong enough to support an enduring *collective* We-mindset. A collective We-mindset accesses the power of community, the power of connectedness. This power is not hierarchical, but *collective*, which emanates from collective inner knowing and inner work. Collective power also cycles back to further deepen inner knowing in service to outer doing, thus manifesting change. Through this recursive cycle collective power grows. We uncover our individual and collective wholeness as relationships among equals, which strengthen life's resolve toward universal equity and harmony. Most importantly, we come to recognize that change is *not an attempt to fix what is broken*; it is the *process of breaking what is fixed*, or static, in our individual and collective hearts and minds.

We wondered how our organization might support others on their journey of "breaking what is fixed," in service to the transformation of self and society. We aspired to design a program where relationality and wellbeing are central; a safe container where we could grow community capacity for connectedness, foster a We-mindset, and support the journey from me-to-We. In 2020, we initiated a collective practice space called *Community Mindworks*, an online monthly public offering. The heart of the program is a guided contemplative inquiry, a meditative questioning practice designed to elicit "other ways of knowing," to support connecting deep within oneself for insights (Zajonc, 2009). In our version of contemplative inquiry, each session focuses on inner and outer change, and centers around one of Kabat-Zinn's (2014) attitudes of mindfulness. Two questions are taken into contemplation, presented in succession, with time between to journal insights. The first question focuses on inner, me; the second on outer, We. For example, on the attitude of acceptance the questions were: *In what ways are you seeing yourself clearly, as you actually are?* and *What would it look like for our community to courageously recognize that things are the way they are,*

and to form an intention to respond in a heartfelt way? After reflection, open discussion follows where participants share insights.

Community Mindworks offers an opportunity to send transformative intentions out into the world in small practical ways. It holds space so we might engage with our own inner spark, ground ourselves in mindful attitudes, grow awareness-based capacities, and deepen our inner work. It is an opportunity for collective service, to experience how "the wholeness in you is the same as the wholeness in me," and how service is a relationship between equals that strengthens us as well as others (Remen, 1999). We envision each insight as a small but important spark that catalyzes our collective power to co-create the more beautiful world we long for, from the inside out.

The 4C Framework: The Journey From Me To We

Throughout our journey, the intention to transcend our inner limits has been the focus of our collective work. We began with the aspiration to govern our nonprofit differently, propelled by the spark of what is possible. We wanted to develop a new form of contemplative governance. This meant taking an awareness-based approach to organizing, managing, and being in just relationship with ourselves, and others. Our central tenets were to support wholeness, to ground and center relationality and collective wellbeing, and to foster the creation of internal and external structures that are more just. Our commitment was to do the inner me-work in order to do our We-work, to engage in collective contemplative practices, access our inner knowledge, and cultivate a We-mindset.

The bedrock of this journey focused on *catalyzing our collective capacity for change*. Those four "C-words," Catalyst, Collective, Capacity, and Change, became what we refer to as "The 4Cs"—a conceptual framework to help us better understand the inner journey from me-to-We. To reiterate, *Catalyst* represents the spark and motivation for knowing and engaging awareness. It is the sense that something is moving within; a nudge to take action, to get started. *Collective*, represents gathering our inner resources, fostering our ability for interconnection, and growing our understanding of the transformative power of We. We

embrace an essential focus on relationality and wellbeing, and commit to do the me-work required for We-work. *Capacity* is about deepening our understanding, practices, and relationships, further shifting from a me-mindset to a We-mindset and expanding our sense of interdependence. We activate our collective agency and engage in collective effort to challenge our inherited internal and external structures, by daring greatly. This requires a deep commitment, an open willingness to engage in We-work, and to live our practice in action. Finally, *Change* represents the coalescence of the prior three "Cs," all in service to the transformation of self and society. We cultivate these literacies and grow a collective We-mindset, which accesses the power of our connectedness; a collective power that emanates from collective inner knowing and inner work. Our collective impact is grounded in service, service that is selfless, interdependent, and allows what is emerging to flow into manifestation. This 4C journey from me-to-We is the journey of growing both our capacity for awareness and connectedness. It is also a journey of learning what it takes to transform in these ways, a journey of growing our *transformation literacy*.

Transformation Literacy

In recent years, the definition of literacy has expanded beyond the ability to read and write. "Literacy" has become a synonym for almost any type of competence, including civic literacy, financial literacy, geo-literacy, and multicultural literacy (Mintz, 2022). The ability to gain literacy in a certain area is predicated upon the type of knowledge that is valued. Gaining the transformation literacy needed to support the inner journey from me-to-We is inherently challenging in Western learning environments, which tend to value outer knowledge, and undervalue inner knowledge. Transformation is often similarly framed, with emphasis placed on understanding outer world change. The inner world, then, is relegated to having either little or no significance in the process. Literacy in *transformation* requires a more holistic view that values and includes inner knowledge and inner transformation itself. Although understanding the processes of inner transformation is an important part of transformation literacy, this again can lead to a partial view. Most of-

ten, we think of inner transformation as an individual process, as solitary work. However, the interdependence of me and we highlights the important role of the collective in this process, and the relationship between individual and collective transformation. Thus, transformation literacy must go beyond the self. It is an understanding beyond what it takes to navigate individual transformation, toward what it takes to catalyze our collective transformation.

Deepening into our We-work, we were learning more about the collective dimensions of transformation, the essential sphere of engagement. We came to understand that the principles, practices, and processes contained within The 4Cs were *the literacies* needed for transformation. In other words, they are components of transformation literacy that we need to understand in order to transform. They provide additional guidance on how to facilitate thinking differently, and being differently, in order to drive meaningful change. Becoming literate in The 4Cs fosters the creation of what we have come to understand as *transformative unity*; the interdependent unity necessary to transform the world.

Transformative Unity

The Mindfulness Alliance is just beginning to comprehend what it does and does not yet understand of transformative unity. As our core questions were lived, we learned that the me-to-We journey *is* what we needed to understand, is what we needed to become more literate in, for transformation to be possible. The answers we lived into about transformation included understanding that change is iterative, recursive, and requires unity. We began working with imagery, exploring shapes and symbols, to help us gain a deeper understanding of this 4C journey, this movement toward transformative unity. We learned how shapes organize and orient our world, and how their evolution signals new ways of thinking and living (Stark, 2018). We discussed the symbolism of change, how it is a web of causality, a helix of flowing interconnection, a network of interdependence, and infinite in nature. This led us to realize that transformative unity is best visualized as a torus.

The torus is a three-dimensional shape that looks similar to a donut (Figure 2). It consists of a central axis, a vortex at both ends, and a surrounding coherent electromagnetic field. Energy flows in one vortex, through the central axis, out the other vortex, and wraps around itself to return to the first vortex (Johnson, 2019). Science tells us that the to-
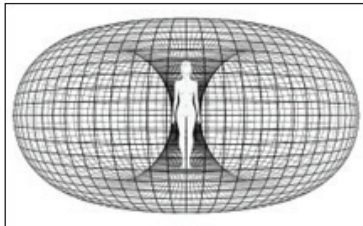
Figure 2

Torus Shape
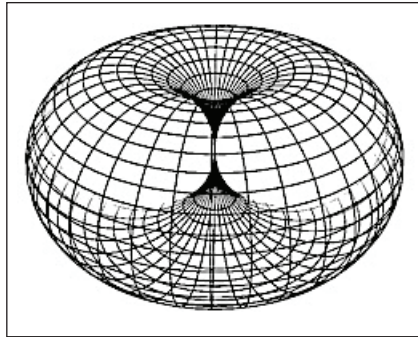
rus's energy flow, *toroidal flow*, is the flow of life. We see toroidal flow in plants (Figure 3), in ourselves (Figure 4), and in the planet (Figure 5) (Gin, 2016). Toroidal flow pushes out as it draws in. It is balanced, dynamic, and self-regulating. However, many of us live unaware of this dynamic energy at work within us and our world. Our disconnection from this knowledge impedes our ability to harness and work with it, often leaving us feeling out of balance, stagnant, and unregulated.
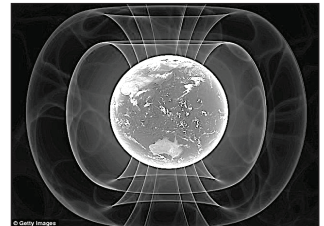
Figure 3

Tree Toroidal Flow
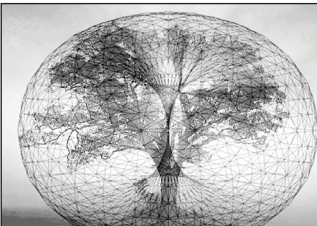
Figure 4

Human Toroidal Flow


Figure 5

Earth Toroidal Flow

Stark (2018) envisions the torus as characterizing our emerging era. This shape embodies dynamic systems in flow, untied to fixed references or former expectations, which supports our thinking in new and different ways. We incorporated the torus shape, and the understanding of toroidal flow, into our emerging understanding of the movement toward transformative unity. Inherent in the 4C framework are the characteristics of toroidal flow. Toroidal flow can also be understood as the continuous flow of change. As we understand and engage with The 4Cs, their conscious incorporation through awareness harnesses the toroidal flow, from an inner flow to an outer flow, from inner knowing toward outer doing, from me-to-We and We-to-me. In simplistic terms, we move recursively from being sparked into action through awareness (catalyst), to gathering necessary inner resources and community partners (collective), to deepening our awareness, our practice commitments, and our connectedness (capacity), to an expression of service in the world (change). This process is lived in constant, nonlinear, dynamic motion, moving us toward transformative unity. The torus helped us to deepen our understanding of the 4C journey from me-to-We, and to give name to this ever-present unifying process, the *Cycle of Transformative Unity* (Figure 6).

Figure 6

The Cycle of Transformative Unity
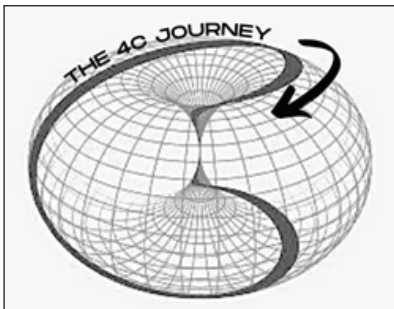
Note. The highlighted path illustrates the dimensionality and dynamic movement of the 4C process in continuous cyclic flow. Although one path is depicted for simplicity, countless paths are unfolding simultaneously. They encompass the entirety of the torus, demonstrating the repetitive, multifaceted, interdependent journey from me-to-We.

The Cycle of Transformative Unity elucidates how the *power of awareness* and the *power of community* are essential elements in driving positive social change. This model describes the awareness-based journey of connectedness we are all traveling, and the literacies needed to foster transformative unity. This unifying factor, this aspect of the dynamism of existence, is the galvanizing force that fosters transformation. In other words, growing our capacity for connectedness and living the interdependent flow of unity, is the collective ground from which more just relationships and systems come into being. The toroidal flow of this cycle helps us better understand the movement from inner work, and interconnectedness, to manifestation in the world, and how it always cycles back with a new spark for future manifestation in a continuous self-sustaining and self-fulfilling feedback loop. This reciprocal exchange helps us to understand the "pathways through which the qualitative infinity of nature may manifest" (Bohm & Nichol, 2002, p.10). Lastly, the toroidal flow reminds us of the importance of challenging our mental models, which categorize, separate, and create discrete parts. Toroidal flow shows us inner and outer, me and We simultaneously and always at play. The torus depicts no division, just one unending flowing process, wholeness, and unity. This supports the embodiment of unitive thinking and being, by activating the latent potential for transformative unity lying at the heart of each and every We.

Walking The Path Of Possibility

Considering the multifaceted challenges our world faces, we need to engage in a radical investigation of our inner infrastructure, in order to reimagine a way forward. Global systems and structures can only be reimagined when we let go of our acceptance of the old order, of outmoded methods and models for fixing and problem-solving. Instead, we must begin to leverage our inner knowing and inner work for social change. Higher education systems can play an important role in this reimagining process. As modern incubators of cultural norms and values that train the populace across all fields of human endeavor, academia can take on a radical investigation of its own "inner infrastructure" by first reexamining

what it deems acceptable and valuable knowledge. Educators can be a guiding light for reimagining a new way forward by acknowledging and extoling the value of awareness and inner knowledge as important literacies to cultivate, and ultimately repositioning inner knowledge and inner work as *valuable* and *critical* 21st century skills.

The Mindfulness Alliance is reimagining ways of being and doing in the service of We-work and social change. We believe that the shift to a We-perspective, from a place of understanding and engaging the inner work of me, is needed in order to respond to our urgent societal challenges. Over the past two years, we developed educational programming to help build the inner infrastructure needed to support the shift from me-to-We, the *WeShift Series*. This learning journey will support and teach: a unique 4C approach to transformation literacy, related We-based practices and processes, and the holistic perspective embodied in the Cycle of Transformative Unity. We are on the precipice of launching this groundbreaking series. We hold our collective intentions in alignment with, and in humble service to, the global effort to foster the interdependent unity needed to change the world.

Throughout our noble experiment, we relied on living our practice and our core questions, while aspiring to live the answers. Our nonprofit became our petri dish, the experimental arena where we explored how to foster a cultural shift in how We-see, how We-work, how We-play, and how We-live together, all predicated on our 4C framework and the Cycle of Transformative Unity. Our learning journey was grounded in the core intention to catalyze our collective capacity to foster awareness-based social change, and this journey is far from over. Although we understand this case study is limited to the experiences of nine self-identified professionals in one organizational context, we are convinced that the combined power of awareness and power of community are essential on our collective journey to transformative unity, and that these are the keys to realizing the fullness of our potential as individuals and as a global community. We believe the explication of views shared herein are not simply of theoretical value; they are relevant to educators, leaders, practitioners, and change-makers in any arena.

These views have implications for the evolution of practice frameworks and trainings, and the creation of educational spaces to advance positive social change—a subject matter of significant interest for this moment in history.

The 4C model offers new ways of thinking and teaching about the transformative journey of growing awareness by (1) framing this journey as *inherently* a journey of connectedness, a movement from me-to-We, toward unity, and (2) suggesting that the principles, practices, and processes contained therein are necessary components of transformation literacy. The 4C literacies provide additional guidance on how to think differently, and be differently, in order to drive meaningful change. The evolution of the 4C literacies into the Cycle of Transformative Unity offers an expanded perspective for thinking about and visualizing the interdependent processes of individual and collective change by (1) utilizing the holistic lens of toroidal flow, and (2) introducing the term transformative unity to explicate the type of interdependent unity necessary to transform the world. The concepts embodied in these models add to the *grammar of the social field*, our understanding of "the structure of the relationships among individuals, groups, organizations, and systems that gives rise to collective behaviors and outcomes" (Scharmer, 2017, para. 1) and their impact on broader societal change.

From a practical perspective, these emergent models, the 4C framework and the Cycle of Transformative Unity, serve as conceptual tools for meeting the challenges of the day, and beyond. They serve as guideposts, reorienting us to shift our mindset and practice intentions beyond the self, beyond personal growth and wellbeing, toward collective wellbeing. They offer practices and methods for challenging our inner and outer inherited structures, for building our connectedness, and for learning to work toward and with interdependence. These models help us see more clearly the relationship between inner change and outer change, between me and We, and to value collective We-work. Ultimately we hope these models, and the experimental experiences of this case study, contribute to the collective conversation regarding the role of awareness and community in social change, and serve as inspiration for others to continue, or join, in this noble and pressing quest.

In the age of the Anthropocene, we understand that our outmoded ways of thinking and doing are the primary source of our global problems, and that solutions lie in our capacity to reimagine and reshape our ways of being (Conceição, 2020). Scharmer (2021b) reminds us that this reshaping is possible, because the social structures we have created "are fluid, not frozen; they evolve, just as our human consciousness does." This statement beckons us to recognize that we are all change-makers by our very nature, and that we each have agency. However, the capacity for reimagining at the scale needed today requires collective collaboration of the magnitude necessary to effect broad social impact. So, how do we access, activate, and harness the interdependent flow of unity necessary to transform the world? Eisenstein (2022) contends that by *declaring what is possible*, we declare what the world is—we make it possible for human beings to do so. As stewards of our future, we are called to collectively ignite the spark of possibility by making bold declarations. What do you dare to declare? May we all dare greatly, and reimagine a way forward—together.

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