

nature—and there the intelligence and compassion at the core of life can ignite entire. As in the hologram of modern science, each part contains the whole.

The bodhisattva, the Buddhist hero figure, is one who knows and takes seriously the dependent co-arising of all things. That is why he also knows that there is no private salvation, and that is why she turns back from the gates of nirvana to reenter samsara, the world of suffering, again and again to minister to all beings until each, to every blade of grass, is enlightened. Here is revealed the compassion that blooms naturally when we open to our condition of profound mutuality. Since that condition pertains to us all, whether or not we acknowledge it yet, we are all, in a sense—the Scripture tells us—bodhisattvas.

These teachings, practices, and images have, like systems theory, inspired and shaped “the work that reconnects” presented in this book. For the Buddha’s core teaching of dependent co-arising, we sometimes use a new word, coined by a Vietnamese Zen master of today. It recalls the term “interexistence” used by some systems theorists to characterize the relationship of open systems, but is less of a mouthful. The word made popular and potent by Thich Nhat Hanh is “interbeing.”

### THE NATURE OF OUR POWER

As our pain for the world arises from our systemic interexistence, so does our power. Yet the generative creativity operating in and through open systems is very different from our customary notions of power.

#### Power-over

The old concept of power, in which most of us have been socialized, originated in the worldview which assumed reality to be composed of discrete and separate entities—rocks, plants, atoms, people. An Aristotle classifying these entities into categories or a Newton or Galileo studying their vectors and velocities all worked with that assumption. Power came to be seen as a property of those separate substances, inferred from the way they could appear to push each other around. It became identified with domination. It was equated with the exertion of one’s will over others, limiting their choices. This is a linear, unidirectional view of causality, in which power is a zero-sum game: “the more of it you have, the less of it I have”; “if you win, I lose.” It fosters the idea, furthermore, that power correlates with invulnerability. To keep from being pushed around, defenses are needed. Armor and rigidity make one more powerful, less likely to be influenced or changed, i.e. dominated by the other.

From the systems perspective this notion of power is both inaccurate and dysfunctional. The exertion of greater force can certainly serve to defend oneself and others, but that function is one of protection, not to be confused with the generation of new forms, behaviors, and potentials. That capacity operates more organically and reliably from the bottom up, as “power-with.” Systems scientists call it *synergy*.

#### Power-with

Living systems evolve in variety, resilience, and intelligence; they do this not by erecting walls of defense and closing off from their environment, but by opening more widely to the currents of matter-energy and information. They integrate and differentiate through constant interaction, spinning more intricate connections and more flexible strategies. For this they require not invulnerability, but increasing responsiveness. Such is the direction of evolution. As life forms evolve in complexity and intelligence, they shed their armor, grow sensitive, vulnerable protuberances—like lips, tongues, ears, eyeballs, noses, fingertips—the better to sense and respond, the better to connect in the web of life and weave it further. UB

We may wonder why power as domination, which we see enacted around us and on top of us, seems so effective. Many who wield it seem to get what they want—money, fame, control over others’ lives. Yes, they do, but always at a cost to the larger system and to their own well-being within it. To the social system, power-over is dysfunctional because it inhibits diversity and feedback; by obstructing self-organizing processes, it fosters entropy—systemic disintegration. To the power holder himself, it is like a suit of armor: it restricts vision and movement. Narrowing awareness and maneuverability, it cuts him off from fuller and freer participation in life; he has far fewer options for response.

#### Power and feedback

Power-with or synergy is not a property one can own, but a process one engages in. Efficacy is transactional. Take the neuron in the neural net. If it were, hypothetically, to suppose that its powers were a personal property to be preserved and protected from other nerve cells, and isolated itself behind defensive walls, it would atrophy, or die. Its health and its power lie in opening itself to the charge, letting the signals through. Only then can the larger systems of which it is a part learn to respond and think.

The body-politic is much like a neural net, as Karl Deutsch asserts. Like the brain,

Something inside me  
has reached to the  
place where the  
world is breathing.  
—Kabir 18

society is a cybernetic system which only functions well with unhampered flows of information. That is how our mind-bodies work. When you put your hand on a hot stove, you rapidly withdraw it, because feedback tells you your fingers are burning. You wouldn't know that if you began censoring your body's reports.

Self-governance requires the free circulation of information necessary to public decision-making. In the present hypertrophied stage of the Industrial Growth Society, however, even governments that call themselves democracies suppress information unwelcome to corporate interests. We learn daily of high-level cover-ups, a scientific panel's findings officially rejected, a report censored. We have become accustomed to misinformation and deception about an enormous array of dangers, such as the relationship of cancer and other diseases to radioactivity, food additives, or household products. We hear little about the effects and causes of thinning ozone and the greenhouse effect, even when we're awash in record-breaking floods and hurricanes, and global food reserves are at an all-time low. This institutionalized secrecy is understandable in terms of protecting vested interests, but it comes at a high price. For any system that consistently suppresses feedback—closing its perceptions to the results of its behavior—is suicidal.

### The power of disclosure and refusal

While the concept of power-with summons us to develop empathy, it also calls for vigilance and assertiveness in responding to the self-organizing needs of the larger system. It is our systemic responsibility to give feedback to our body politic, and unblock that feedback which has been suppressed. This is essential to the Great Turning from the Industrial Growth Society to a Life-sustaining Society. Many of its unsung heroes are women and men who, often at considerable personal risk, unearth and disclose important information held from the public.

Our interexistence with others in the web of life does not mean that we should tolerate destructive behavior. On the contrary, it means we should step in when our collective health and survival are at stake. That can involve lobbying for laws, or intervening in a more direct fashion, nonviolently, to remove authority from those who misuse it. This is not a struggle to "seize" power so much as to release it for efficient self-governance. Thus we act, not only for ourselves and our own group or party, but also on behalf of all the other "neurons in the net." Then we are sustained by the myriad resources of that net, which include all our differences and diversities.

Acting on behalf of the larger system, for the common good, is becoming alien to the mores of the Industrial Growth Society. Corporations, by their very financial structure, must maximize their own short-term profits, regardless of the impact. Within this increasingly competitive system, individuals perceive their own self-interest to be in conflict with the interests of others. Many are so deeply entrenched in this point of view that they assume activists must be similarly motivated, and label them as "special interest groups." To act on behalf of the common good can serve overlapping purposes: it brings needed feedback to the system about challenges it faces, and transforms the premises under which that system operates. It helps to change the norms from individual, competitive self-interest to collective, systemic self-interest.

### Synergy and grace

When we make common cause on behalf of the Earth community, we open not only to the needs of others, but also to their abilities and gifts. It is a good thing that power-with is not a personal property, because, frankly, none of us possesses all the courage and intelligence, strength and endurance required for the Great Turning. And none of us *needs* to possess them, or dredge them up out of some private storehouse. All the resources we will need arise out of our interactions, as we commit ourselves to a common intent for our common fate.

This is the nature of synergy, the first property of living systems. As parts self-organize into a larger whole, capacities emerge which could never have been predicted, and which the individual parts did not possess. The weaving of new connections brings new responses and new possibilities into play. In the process, one can feel sustained—and *is* sustained—by currents of power larger than one's own.

This phenomenon is similar to the religious concept of grace, but distinct from the traditional understanding of grace, as it does not require belief in a God. Whether restoring a garden or cooking in a soup kitchen, there is a sense sometimes of being supported by something beyond one's individual strength, a sense of being "acted through." This empowerment often seems to come through those for whose sake one acts. In the last unprotected groves of redwoods, young activists weather the cold rainy winter and police violence, as they perch in the trees to save them from illegal logging. Their valor and endurance is not their own, they say, but bestowed upon them by the the great beings they seek to save. "They know we're here; they give us strength." This kind of empowerment is familiar to many today who work for their own threatened communities,

or for distant peasants ripped from land and livelihood, or for children imprisoned in sweatshops and brothels. Those who risk their lives to protect marine mammals, and those who risk jail to stop paying taxes for weapons, and those who risk their jobs to “blow the whistle” on corruption and deception—they also draw on vaster powers of life. These people, whose numbers are countless, show us what can happen through us when we break free of the old hierarchical notions of power. Grace happens when we act with others on behalf of our world.

## Chapter 4

### THE WORK THAT RECONNECTS

*You, sent out beyond your recall,  
go to the limits of your longing.*  
—Rainer Maria Rilke<sup>19</sup>

INSIGHTS INTO THE BASIC MIRACLE OF OUR EXISTENCE—be they from general living systems theory, Buddhist teachings, or other ancient voices—have broken upon us in the very century that has brought us to the brink of destroying our planet as a home for conscious life. They are fundamental and far-reaching enough to help us liberate ourselves from the Industrial Growth Society and create together a Life-sustaining Society. If we can let these insights shape our own life purposes, they can enable the Great Turning.

That is a big “if.” For while the new paradigm is the stuff of countless lectures and books, it is purveyed mainly on the intellectual level. As a plaything of the mind, it is fascinating—even hopeful—but we urgently need ways to let it transform our lives for the healing of our world.

Over the last twenty years, since the late 1970s, a form of personal and group work has grown up to help us do just that. Arising first in North America, it spread to Eastern and Western Europe, Australia, and Japan through articles circulating from hand to hand, and through workshops that have engaged some hundreds of thousands of people, within and beyond movements for peace, justice, and a healthy environment. First it was called “Despair and Empowerment” work, then