



SUSTAINABILITY LEADERS NETWORK
Deepening Learning & Practice for People & Planet

Fellows Annual Seminar

3-7 October 2011

Cobb Hill Ecovillage, Hartland, Vermont



Learning for Sustainability: Reflection and Action in the Harvest Season

Participants: (top left) Elaine Kohrman, Trista Patterson, Virginia Farley, Michaelyn Bachhuber, Dominic Stucker, Maria Latumahina, Huma Beg, Karabi Acharya, Nirmala Nair, Edie Farwell, Carla Kimball; not pictured, partial participants: Tim Brown, Daniella Malin, Don Seville, Jed Davis, Lorie Loeb, Nancy Gabriel, Natalie Starr; not pictured, guest speakers: Beth Sawin, Jay Mead, Jonathan Halperin, and Phil Rice.

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Sustainability Leaders Network

Our vision is an aligned global network of leaders that individually and collectively work at their highest capacity to bring about the transition to a just and sustainable world. Our mission is deepening the capacity of sustainability leaders who are steeped in the legacy of Donella Meadows and use an approach that integrates vision, systems thinking, reflective conversation and creative expression.

The purpose of our Fellows Annual Seminar is to engage all four classes of Donella Meadows Leadership Fellows to nurture relationships across cohorts, sectors, and countries; learn from one another's personal and professional efforts to bring about sustainability; regroup in nature and Cobb Hill, reflect, articulate short- and long-term visions; engage in thematic discussion and action projects, and deepen and expand ways of working together between seminars such as through peer coaching and affinity groups.

Participants represented six countries and the non-profit, business, and government sectors. Speakers included Beth Sawin and Phil Rice from Climate Interactive; Virginia Farley and colleagues from the Marsh Billings Rockefeller National Historical Park; Karabi Acharya of Ashoka Changemakers; guest speaker Jonathan Halperin of Designing Sustainability; and facilitators Edie and Dominic.

Planning Team

The planning team for the 2011 seminar was Edie and Dominic and Fellows Karabi Acharya and Mike Dupee. This team collaboratively designed the workshop goals and agenda. A full workshop packet was produced with both a printed version and one coming next week online to the Fellows Network Wikispace.

The Learning Spiral as Seminar Map

The workshop was designed using the Learning Spiral, below, with a day each dedicated to reflection, vision, design, and action. Participants had an opportunity to reflect on a past vision and efforts to realize it, as well as articulate the next iteration of their vision – or a new one – and design strategy, action and next steps.

Learning Spiral Learning in Complex Systems



Learning - building capacity for effective action

Building on the mandate here from Dana Meadows,

Nothing is more difficult than to practice goodness within a system whose rules, goals, and information streams are geared to individualism, competitiveness, and cynicism. But it can be done. We can be patient with ourselves and others as we all confront a changing world. We can empathize with resistance to change; there is some clinging to the ways of unsustainability within each of us.

We can include everyone in the challenge; everyone will be needed. We can listen to the cynicism around us and pity those who indulge in it, but refuse to indulge in it ourselves. The world can never pass safely through the adventure of bringing itself to sustainability if people do not view themselves and others with compassion. That compassion is there, within all of us, just waiting to be used, the greatest resource of all, and one with no limits.

– Donella Meadows

Eddie opened the workshop with a call to creating reinforcing loops of goodness as an essential basis for action, citing the many recent stories of community outreach, neighborly help and kindness spread throughout Vermont after the devastation caused by Hurricane Irene; and in New York during the 10 year anniversary of 9/11 the remembrances of the outpouring of compassion and taking care of one another amidst the violence. She then told the Cherokee story of Two Wolves:

One evening an old Cherokee told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside people. He said, "My son, the battle is between 2 "wolves" inside us all.

One is Evil. It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego.

The other is Good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith."

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather: "Which wolf wins?"

The old Cherokee simply replied, "The one you feed." --author unknown

Gathering together for the seminar helps us feed our own goodness, and bring forth more goodness in the world as an action to bring forth sustainability.

In tribute of the late Wangari Maathai, Kenyan systems thinker, we watched the encouraging video "[I will be a humming bird.](#)" On receiving the news of being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, 2004, Maathai said, "*It is evident that many wars are fought over resources which are now becoming increasingly scarce. If we conserved our resources better, fighting over them would not then occur...so,*

protecting the global environment is directly related to securing peace...those of us who understand the complex concept of the environment have the burden to act. We must not tire, we must not give up, we must persist.”

Similar themes to several of Dana’s writing. The goals of working at our highest levels, personal integrity and alignment permeated the rest of the workshop, coupled with the conviction that we have the resources we need to succeed in bringing about sustainability for ourselves and the world, so long as we bring our best selves and best skills forward.

Reflection

Beth Sawin led a session on ‘*Climate, Energy, and Adaptation*,’ emphasizing that we are experiencing climate change now - offering examples from Hurricane Irene in Vermont - and need to adapt and mitigate simultaneously. She pointed out that rebuilding after disaster is not enough anymore; we need to innovate and redesign as we go, building community connectedness and resilience, preparing for future impacts. Through her work with [Climate Interactive](#), she contributed to the [Emissions Gap Report](#), which shows that it is possible to hold temperature rise to 2 degrees Celsius by the end of the century. Such a trajectory requires ambitious commitment and action from governments, but is both technically and economically feasible. Fellows pointed out the need to also provide incentives to businesses and grassroots organizations, which might be quicker to action than governments. All agreed that we need to take both the short term, political timeline of 2020 into consideration, but, given the delays inherent in the climate system, the longer term view as well.

Drawing on Climate Interactive’s En-Roads climate model, Beth dispelled three pervasive myths about climate change and energy: (1) that we have energy technologies in the pipeline that emit no carbon dioxide (even if so, such technologies would first increase energy demand and there would be delays in bringing it to scale); (2) natural gas is an effective climate change solution; and (3) it is too hard to act. She made clear that we have to get the world off of fossil fuels and to find ways in which to increase wellbeing, while consuming less energy. Since the Industrial Revolution, the average global temperature has risen 0.8 degrees Celsius and, if we stop emitting CO2 outright today, the temperature increase will still go up to 1.4. Referring to Hurricane Irene, the group talked about how the disaster make clear what is meaningful to families and also demonstrated the great extent to which neighbors care for one another.

Art of Sustainability

The afternoon of the first day, artist Jay Mead took the group to Sumner Falls, a wild part of the Connecticut River, for a reflection via art session. The session focused on engaging the right brain, which is closely associated with thinking outside the box and creativity. Creative problem solving is essential for addressing the many challenges we face in bringing about a sustainable future for people and planet; art and creative expression is a powerful mechanism for enhancing this capability. The group was encouraged to start from a place of unknowing, of having no preconceived notions. They were asked to observe what they saw around them, reflect, see patterns, play, and create an art piece. The recent flooding of the river meant that flotsam and jetsam were incorporated into many pieces, bringing

order and beauty to the chaos. Afterwards, the group toured each art pieces to hear reflections inspired by the creative process.



After dinner Fellows had an opportunity to map out one cycle of the Learning Spiral on a large poster, reflecting on a past vision and strategy for its realization. These were discussed in a Gallery Walk the next morning and remained hanging on the wall for the rest of the week for further reference and discussion.

Vision

On visioning day, we took a field trip, hosted by Fellow Virginia Farley, to the [Marsh Billings Rockefeller National Historical Park](#) to experience a physical manifestation of three men's vision. The area, once completely denuded of forest for grazing livestock and economically depressed due to soil erosion, has been reforested through the collective efforts and vision of the park's namesake families. In his book [Man and Nature](#), George Perkins Marsh was already calling for a revolution of the human-nature relationship in the mid-19th century, with a focus on humans as co-workers with nature. Billings wanted to create a place of healing and reflection, while providing economic stimulus to surrounding communities, so he embarked on a massive tree planting campaign, which his wife and daughters took on and implemented. Experiencing the realized vision of the park, Virginia asked us 'What does sustainability look like for this place now?' She pointed to continued community engagement, teaching, and leadership development, plus the LEED Certified Forest Center where we were meeting, built with sustainably managed wood from the park.

In this context, we celebrated the foresight of the United States national park system, then did a guided visioning exercise, including journaling and walking the park's trails. As we gathered afterwards, Fellows expressed gratitude for the beauty of the woods as a place for restoration of the spirit, reflection, inspiration and vision.

Design

Our day dedicated to design offered Fellows three related modalities to consider for helping realize their visions: emotion, coaching and systems mapping. Fellow Karabi Acharya gave a compelling presentation and organized small group discussions on *Putting Emotion to Work*, bringing emotion and empathy into a

professional setting as a strategy for change. Emotion and empathy are levers that we typically don't access, but emotion is very powerful and often at the root of why we do or don't undertake a project, or how much priority we give it.

From "Feeling Our Feelings Might Not Be a Trivial Exercise"
01/30/1997 – Donella Meadows

Sadness. Hopelessness. Fear. Anger. I think it's impossible for anyone to understand the state of the earth without feeling these emotions. Strong emotions are entirely appropriate. And they could be the motive force for reversing the gloomy trends -- which are, almost all, reversible. The only way we will ever engage in a shift to new, sustainable ways of living is by caring and feeling.

When I really let myself experience the state of the world, my first reaction is bottomless, unutterable sorrow. That moves quickly into outrage. The sorrow I can deal with; the outrage I used to suppress -- after all, it might offend someone. Now I use it to give me courage. When I get mad, I have to move. With half-suppressed anger, I tend to swing out and do something impetuous and ignorant. But a fully felt, grounded, familiar anger can move me through a lifetime commitment to make things better.

Feelings, like knowledge, don't directly change anything. But if we don't rush past the feelings or stuff them down, if we take time to admit even the most uncomfortable ones, to accept them, share them, and couple them with knowledge of what is wrong and how it might be fixed, then feelings and knowledge together are the motor for change. The feelings make the doings of a technological, cultural, economic, and political revolution inevitable. Unstoppable.

Karabi demonstrated that increased understanding and empathy help us see the systems we are trying to change from different stakeholders' vantage points. Empathy is of two kinds: the knowledge of walking in another's shoes and the visceral feeling of that experience. She offered numerous examples of the power of engaging authentically with emotion, including the video 'Love. Not Loss.' emphasizing the importance of a love for nature formed during childhood. Karabi posited that there is a great power in the authenticity of emotion, offering the example of a TEDx talk she attended on the Gulf oil spill. Otherwise describing the spill with quantitative data, the room was hushed on two different occasions when two white, male scientists choked up, sharing respective stories of a dolphin that was seemingly asking for help and the severe impacts on fishing communities.

Pointing out that feelings and knowledge together are a motor for change, Karabi asked us, in small groups, to consider how we can convey emotion to inspire action. Groups reported back, pointing out the need for creating an emotional safety net for colleagues that allows that to take risks and be vulnerable, allowing emotion and meaning. Others said that using storytelling is one safe container to convey emotion effectively. Participants generally agreed that the emotional and rational are not necessary opposite ends of a continuum and that having both leads to the most robust discussions and decision-making.

Systems Mapping Clinic

Another opportunity for Fellows to design strategy was a Systems Mapping Clinic with Beth Sawin and Phil Rice. The group practiced stock-and-flow and causal loop diagrams, emphasizing the roles they can play in stimulating meaningful discussion among stakeholders. Participants had a mapping refresher and then mapped out the systems they sought to change, seeking to identify levers for change. Fellows mapped out the in and out flows of natural capital, a diagram depicting the uptake of a positively oriented development TV channel in Pakistan,



Emergent Discussions

Some of the questions and discussions that emerged during the above sessions, and during Fellow's individual 3-minute presentations, group coaching, morning check-ins, and informal conversations included:

- How and where should we intervene in an unraveling system?
- How can I sustain myself and my family, while pursuing systems change work?
- How can we hospice out the old and help birth the new?
- How can we deepen relationships with one another for support and change-making?
- How can we deepen our relationship with nature?
- What role does spirituality play in the sustainability movement?
- Why am I in this place, in this time?

Action

We transitioned into our action-focused day by viewing and discussing the film [Hope in a Changing Climate](#) with Producer Jonathan Halperin. (Thanks to Jed Davis for arranging this excellent opportunity). The film highlighted successful efforts in China, Ethiopia, and Rwanda to reforest water basins, contributing to the improvement of the ecology, local livelihoods, and water quality and quantity for downstream consumption and generation of hydroelectricity. While the film focused on adaptation, it also pointed out that reforestation is a way to sequester carbon, both in the trees and improved soils. Fellows responded enthusiastically to the film, encouraging that it be translated into more languages and disseminated widely.

Following the film, Huma and Virginia showed videos and images of the floods in Pakistan and Vermont, demonstrating the need for resilience in the face of these mounting natural disasters. Even while reeling from the impacts, a dairy farming family in New York state, for example, expressed deep gratitude for the many

kindnesses shown by their neighbors after they lost 47 cows, about a fifth of their herd. Additionally, Nirmala showed photos of Bhutan, where she is working with others to introduce carbon-free energy generation technologies.

Affinity Groups

The formation of action-oriented Affinity Groups was a thread that ran through the workshop and culminated with the emergence of the following groups. These are in addition to the current ones on Systems Thinking and Personal Branding that have been meeting regularly since the 2010 seminar. Affinity Groups focus on a sector, geography, practice, or issue area and are intended to help Fellows achieve professional and personal outcomes that they could not in isolation. As next steps, groups will write a short description of their purpose and activities, using this to invite other Fellows from the broader network to join.

| <i>Name</i> | <i>Proposed Activities</i> | <i>People (* = convener)</i> | <i>#</i> |
|---|--|---|----------|
| Image and Emotion | Thematic sharing and discussion of Fellows' photo portfolios | *Trista, *Carla, Virginia, Michaelyn, Huma, Nirmala, Karabi, Edie | 8 |
| Coaching in Fellows Practices | Expand Fellows Network through coaching, drawing on the current curriculum | *Elaine, Edie, Michaelyn, Nirmala, Virginia, Karabi | 6 |
| Getting "The Voice" Out | Coaching for publishing op-ed pieces, possibly through The Op-Ed Project | *Dominic, Edie, Michaelyn, Trista, Maria, Karabi | 6 |
| Personal Mastery | Feed the good wolf; share examples of when operating out of a calm/love/ centered clarity made dreams come true; a watering hole for inspiration; possibly use Robert Gass practices | * Edie, Michaelyn, Virginia, Maria, Huma | 5 |
| Unraveling / Systems Shock | Preparedness, management, leverage points; invite Joanna Macy to facilitate workshop at Cobb Hill | *Michaelyn, *Edie, Virginia, Maria, Huma | 5 |
| Fostering Fearless Creativity / Art of Sustainability | Bring creative expression and art into personal and professional lives | *Karabi, Jay, Carla | 3 |

Beyond Affinity Groups, we collected input on what we want to do as a network. Currently, we offer an annual gathering, group and individual coaching, and affinity groups, in addition to our internal Fellows Wikispace to facilitate deepening of leadership practices, sharing of resources, and collaboration. We also are developing an SLN website that will highlight Fellows and allow the public to

search for them by expertise. Additional action ideas that fell into the following general categories:

Deepen Relationships and Capacity in our Fellows Network

- In-Person Gatherings: regional; unstructured weekend retreats; in variety of places, with cultural richness and connection to land and nature (for ex: Findhorn, United Kingdom, Harmony Farms, Londa Losi in South Africa, Cobb Hill); use a rotating roster for travel support;
- Online: integrate online platforms, including Wikispace, website, blog, Facebook Group, online education; hold webinar on Huma's Pakistan film and other subjects; find one another through LinkedIn Trip Advisor App, plus Fellows interactive map and database

Expand the Fellows Network

- How: Gather and further develop curriculum and make available to Fellows for their use/trainings; Fellows as instructors using our curriculum and coaching to expand network; provide a safe space, place to care for the soul; develop Fellows Speakers Bureau, with other organizations using online search engine to identify speakers
- Who: reach out across generations, Fellows' families, youth, elders; be selective, as this can add value; provide tools to engage more deeply/align with spouse/partner

Enrich our Work Together

- Further develop curriculum: consider including hands on projects such as straw bale construction workshop; offer briefing on our basic principles to guest speakers; collect and share Fellows' success stories: phone calls, Skype, blog, meetings
- Document in writing and in film sustainability success stories of Fellows.

Some of these ideas can be realized through Affinity Groups, while others may require dedicated staff or Fellows' time, and/or further funding.

Appreciations

Gratitude was expressed to the people and place that constitute Cobb Hill. Fellows see it as a place for reflection and inspiration. In particular, they appreciated their hosts and the kitchen staff, serving delicious, local, and organic foods. We are also grateful to key donors, including the Morgan Family Foundation, the Flora Family Foundation, the Wilcox Family Foundation and many individuals for ongoing support of our network in general and this gathering in particular.

"The future can't be predicted, but it can be envisioned and brought lovingly into being. ... We can't impose our will upon a system. We can listen to what the system tells us, and discover how its properties and our values can work together to bring forth something much better than could ever be produced by our will alone. We can't control systems or figure them out. But we can dance with them." – Donella Meadows