



The Healing Power of Systems Change in a Fragile World

Louise Diamond, Ph.D.



INTRODUCTION: THE CASE FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE

We live in a period of deep turbulence in the world, with multiple systems failing simultaneously.

In the United States our health care, education, housing, jobs, and financial systems are in disarray. Meanwhile, our adversarial political system is so mired in polarization, risk-aversion, and the courting of special interests that little meaningful progress can be made on any of these issues.

Globally, we face threats of existential magnitude from climate change; criminal and terrorist networks with potential access to weapons of mass destruction; a growing scarcity of food, water, oil, and other natural resources; and an interdependent economy vulnerable to its weakest link and the whims of those motivated by personal greed.

'Fixing' any one of these systems is a daunting prospect. That they are deeply inter-related can leave even the wisest strategist and most effective problem-solver feeling helpless. What's going on here?

Our thought leaders and those able to see the bigger picture tell us we are living in a time of profound paradigm shift similar to our leap from agricultural to industrial societies. We are moving from a world of separation to a world of interconnectedness; from a mechanistic or reductionist worldview to a holistic or quantum understanding of the nature of reality; from a world of industrial growth that depletes to a world of

sustainability that replenishes.

Suddenly we understand that truly we are all in this together, and that the boundaries of nation state, individual well-being, and national security are superseded by the transnational flow of information, goods, people, money, and the need to address the well-being of the whole. Our assumptions, institutions, and behaviors no longer suit the changing realities, producing a landscape of upheaval, fragility, and uncertainty as we seek both to resist and adapt to the changes at the same time.

Complexity theory tells us that it is precisely at that edge of chaos that the greatest opportunity for creative change exists. When failing systems reach a certain degree of instability, the opportunity arises for innovative solutions and new ideas to emerge. Breakdown calls out for breakthrough; systemic failures call for systems transformation.

The challenge for the change agent is clear. Turbulence on this scale requires people who



can think and act systemically; who can see the bigger picture, apply the best of what we know about human behavior and living systems; and stay grounded and flexible within the messiness and ambiguity of a transformative process that, being unpredictable and non-linear, is beyond the scope of familiar tools of planning and control. It requires a recognition that we live in an historical moment of great privilege, where we can be proactive in shaping that which we wish to see emerging in the midst of this chaos – a just, peaceful, and sustainable world.

In the rest of this article we examine three tools of systems change and how they can be useful in our approach to global challenges: Connect the disconnected, Transform the stories we tell ourselves, and Create the conditions for emergence. We begin with a case study of a systems change intervention in Cyprus, in which a number of NTL Institute members helped catalyze a large-scale bi-communal citizen peacebuilding movement that contributed to the transformation of the political dynamics on the island. We then consider how the adaptation of these systems tools might be creatively applied to other critical issues.

CONNECT THE DISCONNECTED

Because all the elements in a living system are interconnected, as in a web, the first and arguably the most significant task of the systems change agent is to connect that which has become separated from the whole. In the case of Cyprus in 1991 this meant the two communities.

A constitution drawn up at the time of independence in 1960 sought a balance of power between the majority Greek-Cypriot citizens and the minority Turkish-Cypriots. The struggle to find that elusive balance continues to this day, through decades of periodic inter-communal violence, motherland interference from Greece and Turkey, endless and to-date unsuccessful rounds of UN negotiations and EU initiatives, and bitter enmity.

The situation as we found it in 1991 was a divided island, with a UN Peacekeeping force manning a buffer zone (the Green Line) that kept the Turkish-Cypriots (approximately 200,000, plus 35,000 Turkish soldiers and uncountable Turkish immigrants) in the North, with approximately 1/3 of the land, and the Greek-Cypriots (approximately 800,000) in the South.

Physically, the division was complete. There was no telephone contact between the two communities, no postal service, no possibility of moving from one side to the other. Politically the division was asymmetric. The Greek-Cypriot section was internationally recognized as the legitimate government of Cyprus, called The Republic of Cyprus. The Turkish-Cypriot side was a self-

declared independent state, The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), which was recognized only by Turkey and was, in practical effect, a satellite of that country. Economically, the South was modern and thriving, and driving for membership in the EU (which it recently won). The North, not recognized, under embargo, and almost entirely dependent on Turkey, was much poorer.

Emotionally, the split was both intense and dangerous. Several rounds of violent conflict between the two communities in the 1960's, and later an attempted coup by Greece that brought Turkish troops into the fray in 1974, had engendered a massive population exchange where Turkish-Cypriots from what were often mixed villages fled North for safety and Greek-Cypriots fled South as refugees. Hundreds of thousands lost their homes, and many died or were unaccounted for in the confusion of battle.

The legacy of all this was, in 1991, a situation of great animosity and fear between the two communities, fueled by generations of nationalistic hype from political leaders, the media, and an education system that taught each side's own version of history. Without any contact or communication between them for years, both Greek- and Turkish-Cypriots could only think of one another as 'the barbarian at the gates,' waiting for the opportunity to sweep in and finish the job of annihilation. Their sense of 'the other' was locked in the trauma of the past and fed by media stereotyping and political bombast.

It was into this extreme inter-group scenario that our systems change activity landed, by invitation from a small number of courageous individuals from both sides who had previously participated in a handful of bi-communal meetings off the island, and were eager to move a peacebuilding agenda forward despite condemnation from their respective communities for such activities. We agreed that the format would be training in conflict resolution, "So that," as one man put it, "we can solve our own problems."

Before we could consider re-connecting people across the Green Line, we first had to help peace leaders within each community connect with each other. So we began two years of meetings and conflict resolution trainings separately in each community.

The rationale for this was a recognition that until people had some direct experience with the skills of listening, dialogue, managing differences, identifying assumptions, and taking personal responsibility for their actions, any attempt to bring them together over such a stark divide with the other side, with such high emotional content of blame and distrust, would be counterproductive.



At the same time, we noticed that the people involved in this endeavor in each community ranged across the whole left/right political spectrum. Building personal relationships, bridging differences, and finding common ground between the left/right factions early on proved invaluable later, as on several occasions when the process was being attacked as traitorous it was the right-wing folks who stepped up as validators, convincing their governments and their communities to allow it to continue. The other early connections that needed to happen were with the official players in the Cyprus conflict. Thus we consistently met with US, EU, UN and local government leaders on the island as well as in the US, and with other conflict resolution professionals who had an interest in or history with Cyprus, to share what we were doing, learn about other initiatives, and see how it all fitted together.

Weaving this web proved invaluable in creating a powerful civil society-government partnership. The US Ambassador to Cyprus at that time saw the value of the bi-communal conflict resolution trainings and made supporting them official US foreign policy. He backed this up with USAID money that paid for a series of such trainings with leaders from business, media, education, government, youth, and non-profit sectors, thus making possible the widespread citizen peacebuilding movement that eventually resulted.

The UN Special Representative on the island at the time did the same with his mandate. The bi-communal conflict resolution program became officially recognized in his reports to the Secretary General, and resulted in funding through UNDP that continues to this day to support bi-communal projects of all kinds. When other countries saw the value of this approach, they too sponsored bi-communal activities, further spreading the legitimacy and growth of such initiatives.

Systems display common patterns across scale. Just as the people of Cyprus were divided, so too were there divisions within the conflict resolution community that we needed to address. So it was in 1994 that my team, which to date had drawn on NTL members with an organizational development background and had taken a conflict transformation approach, began partnering with a team from the more transactional, negotiation-oriented wing of the conflict resolution world. Our open display of learning from each other, working out our differences, and creating something new out of the best from each side modeled for the Cyprus communities the kind of collaborative process necessary for true peacebuilding.

But the heart of the *connect the disconnected* drive was what happened between the Turkish and Greek-Cypriots themselves as we began to bring them together, and I do mean literally 'the heart,'

for it was the profound change of heart and mind among individuals and then whole sectors that produced the real systems change.

TRANSFORM THE STORIES WE TELL OURSELVES

"They lied to us! All our lives, our teachers, parents, and leaders lied to us. They never told us there was another way to tell this story." So said a young Cypriot woman in one of our workshops, after an exercise exploring each side's version of the history of the conflict.

Human systems exist within a narrative context. We are meaning-makers, and we seek to understand our experiences by crafting stories that explain who we are and what we care about. When those stories serve to further divide us by keeping out, de-humanizing, or blaming 'others' while glorifying ourselves, the whole becomes further fragmented. When this is exacerbated by violence and trauma, and legitimated by the organs of authority, the stories become rigidified and held with a sacred duty to protect.

The workshops and dialogues we facilitated brought people from the two Cyprus communities face-to-face with each other's stories – and allowed them to hear their own in a new way. In one early workshop, for example, a Greek-Cypriot woman told a Turkish-Cypriot man about the pain in her family of fleeing the invasion of the Turkish army in 1974 to become refugees in the south, and about the agony of losing family members to the netherworld of 'the missing.' He then spoke of the joy in his family at the same set of events – that for them the arrival of the Turkish army was not an invasion but a liberation, saving them from destruction and oppression under Greek rule.

As the two stories about the same historical event clashed, the woman had a moment first of cognitive dissonance – how could there be another way of experiencing that catastrophic event? – and then of rage – how dare he celebrate what gave her so much pain? She wanted to walk out of the room and never come back. Instead, she came to the realization that if she truly wanted peace on the island, she needed to keep her heart open to all its people and learn to appreciate the other side's experience as their truth, without invalidating her own.

This process was repeated hundreds, perhaps thousands of times in Cyprus throughout the 1990s, as the peacebuilding movement spread, and more and more Greek and Turkish-Cypriots met one another.

"Daddy, Daddy! There's a Turk in our living room!" shouted a young Greek-Cypriot girl, as she came in one day to find her mother had brought home a



Turkish-Cypriot friend from our workshop. For the children in particular, who were socialized in school to hate and fear 'the other,' this shattering of the accepted storyline was critical.

After the cognitive dissonance came friendship, creating new human connections on a one-to-one and family-to-family basis. The 'Turk in the living room,' it turned out, also had a daughter of about the same age, and the two children developed a friendship through their parents. Later, as teachers came through the bi-communal programs, they had their students become pen pals with age-mates across the Green Line, and new stories for new generations began to evolve.

For the old ones of the two communities who had lived successfully in mixed villages before the violence began, the division had separated them not only from their homes but also from their friends. One participant in the bi-communal movement brings busloads of former inhabitants of the same village together across the Green Line for a day of reminiscing and re-uniting. This too has helped change the stories by legitimating the good memories and friendships that were also part of the larger narrative.

As more and more people began to have direct experiences with those from the other side and began to cross the Green Line, surreptitiously at first, to re-visit their old homes, the officials gave in to the momentum and in 2003 opened the Green Line to allow people to cross to the other side legally. Revisiting their homes and familiar places after decades away and seeing the changes that had occurred broke down even further the stories that had essentially been frozen in time.

Gradually, and without centralized direction, a new set of stories began to take root: "Yes, horrible things happened, but 'the other' are people just like us; they kept our houses in good shape and even returned our family photographs; we can meet them and even be friends with them, and remember when we lived together in peace. Perhaps, though our differences remain, it could be possible again."

Over time this change of heart and mind began to affect the political process. In 2004 the UN finally submitted a negotiated peace agreement to the two communities for referendum. The Turkish-Cypriot side, which had always been considered the intransigent party, voted overwhelmingly in favor of the plan. The Greek-Cypriot side, which had a new nationalist president, alas, rejected it. However, after later elections, they have come out from under the aegis of the UN and instituted direct peace talks with one another, believing, as our first friend said in 1991, that 'we can solve our own problems.'

CREATE THE CONDITIONS FOR EMERGENCE

Our systems change initiative in Cyprus, which lasted from 1991 to 2001 and was only one among several, played a catalytic role in ways we could never have predicted. There was no grand scheme, no strategic plan – there was only our committed presence over time, bringing people together and providing opportunities for them to have new experiences, make new connections, and learn new skills. There was our networking with other players to model collaboration. And there was our ability and willingness to see what was arising and meet it as best we could. They – the people of Cyprus – did the rest.

They set the intention for peace. They told their friends about the dialogues, and encouraged them to join. They went on television to tell their communities what they were learning. They went to their elected officials to share what they were doing. They started bi-communal projects – a dance troupe, a choir, environmental activities, websites and email communication, and more. They took their new skills into their political parties, their professional organizations, their workplaces, their social networks, their businesses, their universities.

They asked for training as trainers, so they could run their own dialogue groups. They were the multipliers, spreading our contact with a few hundred to touch the lives ultimately of countless thousands. They defied their officials and met illegally when the Green Line was closed. They faced death threats and vilification from their neighbors to pursue their unpopular vision of what could be. They brought their children and their elders together. They made seeking peace normative. They re-connected, changed their stories, and gave birth to one of the largest and most vibrant citizen peacebuilding movements of our time.

BEYOND CYPRUS: THE POTENTIAL OF SYSTEMS CHANGE

Cyprus is a blip on the global screen these days. Bigger challenges loom. Climate change, nuclear weapons proliferation, militant extremists, food scarcity, peak oil, economic crises – can the basic principles of systems change be useful in these arenas?

We are starting to see high-level attempts to *connect the disconnected*. President Obama reaching out to the Muslim world in his Cairo speech; his diplomatic overtures to Iran; his attempts to bring bi-partisanship to the health-care conversation are some examples, and show us that it's not always easy or even successful, but it does have impact.

Secretary of Defense Gates has called for a 'whole of government' response to many of our global security threats, seeking to integrate information and



approach from the different branches of government dealing with various pieces of any one issue.

We can take this principle even further. For example, connecting to an understanding of the whole life cycle of uranium as nuclear fuel will show us that, in fact, nuclear power is not viable economically and environmentally. Connecting across scale, we might learn more about nuclear weapons proliferation by studying dynamics surrounding handguns in the US and the spread of small arms around the world.

To transform the stories we tell ourselves, what if we actually convened a global dialogue between Christians, Jews, and Muslims for an honest conversation on how we might live together harmoniously on this planet, given our history and our differences? (And what if we had done that on September 12, 2001?)

What if we change our view that humanity has dominion over the natural world and come to understand that we co-exist with the planet as a single living ecosystem – how might that affect our interactions with our environment? What if we told ourselves that the health, education, jobs, housing, and financial viability of all of our citizens was as much a national security issue as protecting ourselves from outside threats, and deserved the same level of resources?

What are the conditions for emergence? Systems self-organize for the best fit with their environment, and as conditions change, new possibilities arise. While we cannot guarantee certain outcomes, we can encourage innovation by valuing creativity and risk-taking, and aligning our incentives and rewards structures accordingly. We can generate resilience by insuring enough diversity of perspectives and experiences, and by bringing people together across disciplines and functional units.

We can foster synthesis of the best thinking from differing viewpoints by creating safe environments for honest conversations and fruitful dialogues. And we can see ourselves as catalysts, convening and connecting the disparate parts of any system to allow it the opportunity for self-reflection and experimentation.

THE HEALING POWER OF SYSTEMS CHANGE

Einstein reminded us that we cannot solve our problems with the same mind that created them. The three systems principles described in this article are from a different mindset – one that sees the wholeness and the interconnectedness of human systems as a central reality. There are, of course, more than three such principles, for living systems are highly complex and some of our best thinkers from the physical and social sciences are daily discovering more such secrets of the universe.

Yet even focusing only on these three – *Connect the disconnected, Transform the stories we tell ourselves, and Create the conditions for emergence* – gives us a glimpse into what might be possible as we face into the challenges before us. With so many critical systems reaching the edge of chaos in this period, we are called to step back, look at the bigger picture, and then act to heal – or make whole – that which we have broken.

In Judaism it is called *Tikkun Olam*, the healing and repair of the world, and it is considered the highest duty of humanity. The Chinese believe in every crisis there is opportunity. Our opportunity – and arguably our duty – is to unleash the healing power of systems change, for the benefit of our world today and those who will come after.

BIOGRAPHY

Louise Diamond's life is devoted to fostering sustainable human systems and right relations at every level of society. Aware of the opportunity that exists within the great challenges we face as a global community, she recently founded Global Systems Initiatives to bring a systems perspective on interconnected global issues to the policy-making leadership.

To support transformative change agents, she designed and taught a year-long course in How to Change the World. Previously she co-founded The Institute for Multi-Track Diplomacy (IMTD) in Washington, D.C., where she worked as a peacebuilder in places of violent conflict around the world. She also started The Peace Company to show that peace is good business and to bridge the gap between the non-profit and for-profit worlds.

A trainer, consultant, and public speaker for 40 years, Louise is the author of four books, including a best-seller, *The Peace Book: 108 Simple Ways to Make a More Peaceful World*. She has an advanced degree in Organizational Development and a Ph.D. in Peace Studies. She has also been a student of Native American and Tibetan Buddhist ancient wisdom for 35 years.

Louise is an Emeritus Member of NTL and a co-founder of The Alliance for Peacebuilding.

May 2010