

The Solutions in our Midst

Peter Senge

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PETER SENGE: As you may know, I've been involved in a lot of change efforts over a long time and a lot of systems-transformation projects. And this spring, we did something a little bit different. I've had an idea for quite a few years but finally with the help of a couple of good friends, we pulled it off. It was a very simple thing—to bring together eight different groups or sites from around the world, who were living embodiments of the types of human systems—in education, community development, and business—that might emerge.

So I'd like to tell you a few stories to present these people and their work, because obviously what I said

just now is very abstract, and I want to give you a little feeling for it.

URDT

In 1985 or so, I met a man from Uganda, Mwalimu Musheshe, and he and a colleague were starting a program which eventually would be called Uganda Rural Development Training (URDT). They chose to work in the poorest region of what was a chaotic country at the time. In addition to these two men, there were one or two other people who were trying to raise money to support their efforts. Those supporters

This article is based on the final talk given at the tenth Summer Institute of Authentic Leadership in Action (ALIA) in June 2010 in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Over the Institute's ten-year history, it has brought together systems-oriented tools and perspectives with the values and practices of authentic leadership, creating a unique and powerful support for leaders, managers and consultants from around the world. Since the Institute's inception, Dr. Senge has been an advisor, friend and, on several occasions, guest speaker.

asked, “Why do you start in the poorest and the most backward part of the country?” Musheshe and his colleague said that it just seemed like the right place to start. In my first conversation with Musheshe I was really struck by his clarity. He said something that I have never forgotten which I first took to be a statement about Africa but have since seen to be much more general. He said, “The biggest limit on development in Africa is fatalism.” When people do not believe they can alter their future, they do not believe they have efficacy in their life, and it doesn’t matter what you do to help them. Anything you do will just reinforce that belief. That’s why all aid efforts, no matter how enlightened, ultimately have within them the seeds of their own limitation.”

Over the next three or four years, each year, we’d have a group of three or four young Ugandans who had come for about two months of training. We had a three-day leadership course; it used to be called *Leadership and Mastery* long ago. In fact a lot of the ideas that found their way into *The Fifth Discipline* were incubated in that course, starting around 1979. The Ugandans would come every year, and they’d do that program, and they would do a lot of work in personal mastery and systems thinking. Each year, it would be about three people, typically mid- to late-

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twenties. They were “field workers,” working in the villages in this region of Uganda, doing things like helping people dig better wells, establish better granaries, and construct better composting toilets – very basic improvements, but ones that people could undertake and continue themselves, where they did not need further outside assistance. They’d come for about two months and then go back, and of course, we didn’t see them after they went back. They were always wonderful young people, so much so that those of us leading those programs always felt we were really fortunate to be there when the Ugandans were attending.

After a couple years, they’d start to bring us photographs. I’ll never forget the first one I saw of someone who had written their vision on their hut. It was at that moment that I got the feeling that something was really happening. The clarity that the organizers had was shifting the underlying mindset, and then doing things that would reinforce that shift in mindset. You don’t shift a mindset in the abstract. It’s in the day-to-day; it’s in the moment by moment; it’s in the doing; all learning is in the doing.

To make a long story short, today this is the most prosperous region of Uganda. URDT’s work has led to sustained economic development, micro credit, lots of small-enterprise creation, and a lot of emphasis on organic agriculture. In fact, Musheshe was recently asked by the President of Uganda to be a special advisor in their agriculture policy because URDT has been so successful at building a rural economy around organic agriculture. After 25 years, today URDT is probably one of the best success stories of rural development in central Africa.

About twelve or thirteen years ago, as a lot of these basics were starting to fall into place, and something was really happening in the whole region, they shifted and began a focus very specifically in one area. They decided that what was most important was the educa-

THE TALK UPON WHICH THIS ARTICLE IS BASED IS AVAILABLE ON YOUTUBE IN SEVEN SEGMENTS, SUBTITLED AS FOLLOWS. CLICK ON EACH TO VIEW:

- 1: [Introduction](#)
- 2: [Transforming Rural Uganda \(URDT\)](#)
- 3: [The Wisdom of Urban Youth \(Roca\)](#)
- 4: [Working in the Favelas \(CDI\)](#)
- 5: [Unlikely Bedfellows \(Oxfam and Unilever\)](#)
- 6: [Systems Thinking in Early Education](#)
- 7: [Sharing the Insights](#)

tion of girls. How many of you have ever seen the video, *The Girl Effect*? It is quite remarkable and has been very influential around the world. When it first came out about two years ago it was one of the five most watched YouTube videos in the world for a good while. It's remarkable. It probably packs more systems-insight-per-minute, in its 2 minutes and 25 seconds, than anything I've yet seen.

Well, these people, without ever having seen this little video, were living it. In a poor country, most people have to pay for their children's education, and when there's not enough money to pay for all the kids' educations, families generally pay for the boys' education. That's a fairly common pattern, so URDT started opening secondary schools for girls because typically girls will discontinue school around the age of ten, eleven or twelve. Three years ago they opened the first rural women's university in Africa. Along the way, they came up with this brilliant model, what they call the "Two-Level Education Model." Educate the girls, and the girls educate their parents. A lot of their parents don't read, or don't have a lot of the basic skills they need to be effective in a modern society. The girls call themselves "rural transformers."



There's nothing more powerful than two or three minutes of listening to one of these young girls talk – certainly my words are very weak by comparison.

So, URDT was one of the eight "exemplars" of systemic change we brought together in March, in Yucatan, Mexico. In the last two or three months it's

become very apparent to me that miracles like URDT are happening all around us.

Roca

Another one of the organizations that came to this meeting was one I've also known for about twenty years. It's twenty-three or four years old, and it has been achieving similar miracles – this time in inner city environment in this country. [Roca](#) is an organization composed mostly of former gang members who become what they call "youth workers." These are young people, boys and girls, recruited off the streets, who in turn work with others on the streets to escape the street life of gangs, drugs and violence. They do this through an extraordinary process they have developed, primarily using Native American methods.



It is an interesting reflection on how learning is now occurring in this world of ours, that the primary method for the work that goes on with these young Cambodians and Vietnamese and Gabonians and Puerto Ricans comes from the Tlingit Indians in the Yukon, from whom Roca learned what they call "Peacekeeping Circles." When everything is awry, when everything is out of balance, they form a circle. It's quite an experience; to sit down with a group like this, young people who are Latinos or Southeast Asians or Central Africans, the typical polyglot immigrant community you find in cities in North America, and start with "smudging," circulating a bit of burning incense with cleansing smoke and watching these young people pray for guidance that their words and actions can serve their community. I cannot tell you how many young people I have gotten to know at Roca who would now be in jail or dead had it not been for their work.

Today, one of the most eloquent spokespeople



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for Roca – in an incredible juxtaposition of histories and images – is a retired Irish cop, the former police chief where Roca operates in Chelsea, Massachusetts. Chelsea is just across the harbour from Boston, so it's literally about three miles from the financial district of Boston. It is a totally different universe, one that is typical in US cities, where extreme poverty exists cheek-to-jowl with great wealth. I've gotten to know Frank, the retired Irish police chief. He says, "I'm really grateful that in the last ten years of my career I met Roca, because it was the first time in my life I felt like I could actually do something. All my life, all I've been able to do is arrest people, to try to stop crime after the fact. Now for the first time, I feel like we're dealing with the sources of violence in our communities."

So, there, you see again Musheshe's theme about fatalism. I believe most people in America don't believe there is anything we can do about the violence and hopelessness of our inner cities. Speaking as a citizen of the United States, it is one of our dirty little secrets that, for over a decade, it's been more likely that the young African-American man growing up in an American city will go to jail than to go to any form of tertiary education. The largest growing segment of our jail population in America is young African-American women. The United States has around five

percent of the world's population and about 28% of the world's prison inmates. And it's a phenomenal business, much of which has been privatized over the past decade. So our meeting in Mexico also included Roca, which represents an antidote to this fatalism in the U.S., just as URDT does in Africa.

Centre for Digital Inclusion

The meeting also included an amazing group, [CDI, the Centre for Digital Inclusion](#), probably the most successful "digital inclusion" network in the world. There has been a lot of hubbub, and a lot of self-promotion by the computer industry, around how digital inclusion can be a key to solving poverty in the world. And there is an inescapable element in truth in this. If people don't have access to the Internet, they don't have access to being effective participants in their society. But the idea that technology is going to solve these problems seems, at least to me, at best a little naïve and superficial.

CDI is based in Rio de Janeiro, founded by a remarkable young man, Rodrigo Baggio. Rodrigo was a successful IT entrepreneur when, at the age of 25 he said, "I've made plenty of money, I don't need any more money. I want to do something." I met Rodrigo at a meeting in England about two years ago, and then coincidentally I happened to be in Rio about a month later. So I asked if I could visit one of their CDI centres.

How many of you have ever seen the movie, *City of God*? It's a very difficult movie, but it's quite remarkable. I went to the *favela* where that was filmed. Now, the *favelas* in Rio are very interesting because literally the city is designed and planned around these areas that are kind of roped off. You could call it an apartheid type system, but maybe that is a little extreme. It's not that there is limited movement, but there are places where poor people live, very poor people. The *favelas* are very violent. The police do not go into a lot of them.

This particular *favela* the police do not go in. But I went in with Rodrigo and a couple of other people one afternoon about a year and a half ago and sat down with a woman named Dona Anna and a group of young people. I'm guessing that Donna Anna is about 70 years old and was the director of a CDI Community Centre where they have Internet access. Now, this is a

bizarre image, this older “Madre” figure directing an internet facility that draws all these young people, but it is a fitting one for CDI as community builders.

By the way, CDI is now in every *favela* in Latin America, and more than million young people have completed their basic Internet Course. It’s an amazing success story, and now they’re establishing CDI centres in the Middle East, starting in Jordan.



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Digital, Microsoft, and Dell love CDI because this is what they’ve saying all along, i.e. that the Internet and computers solve poverty, which is, as I say, at best a little simplistic. In Rodrigo’s view, it’s kind of like honey; internet access attracts kids because they want to get on line. But CDI does something very different. It’s really quite simple: they offer an introductory training on the Internet, but to complete the training, you must also do a project; it can be anything you want, but it just has to be for the benefit of your community, and you have to use the Internet for the project. That’s it, so that’s the first ten-hour training that they offer for anybody who’s interested. Then they have a social enterprise fund that they’ve set up, so then they can fund people to start businesses that use the Internet for the benefit of their community.

Rodrigo has created an amazing system that somehow uses the Internet to attract young people at risk, connect them, but then help them reflect on how

they want to make their community a better place, and he has gotten a lot of attention for this, including many awards for being a leading “social entrepreneur” and even being on the cover of Time magazine in Brazil.

I’ve been in a lot of intense conversations in my life, but this one in the CDI Centre in Rio will always stand out. There are occasions – I’ve had this experience before – where I’m in the middle of one of these energetically intense conversations and time really does work in a different way. When I went to this *favela*, we were sitting there with Dona Anna and this 25- or 26-year-old younger woman, and the younger woman was telling me about her father. He had been in jail for much of his life. These are obviously places of intense violence, and she was talking about her father’s transformation through his engagement with this Centre. I have to tell you, even before she told that story, I had an overwhelming emotional reaction, even though she had said little. It was like I had already heard the whole story. Don’t ask me how. I kind of knew where the conversation was going; it became incredibly quiet in that circle, and time was not moving in a linear fashion. There was an energy in that circle of about ten people that was very special, as the young girl talked about her father who, after being in prison for 25 years, came back and got involved with this Centre and whose life has been totally transformed. I found out later he was the lead character in that movie the *City of God*. He had been a very violent man.

The Global Sustainable Food Laboratory

In the gathering we had in Mexico, we also had a project I had been very close to. For it, we made an exception to our one of our participation criteria — that everybody had to have been at it for fifteen to twenty years. [The Global Sustainable Food Lab](#) has only been at it for about nine years; Adam Kahane, someone well known in ALIA, was very instrumental with a few other people in getting it established. I have stayed very closely involved as the Food Lab has developed over the past eight years or so. It now involves about 60 or 70 organizations – including many of the largest food companies in the world and the largest NGOs in the world – working together on how we create a truly sustainable system of agriculture. This involves the largest food companies, not just little organics businesses, and



TODAY MANY THINGS HAVE HAPPENED WHICH I WOULD HAVE PREVIOUSLY CONSIDERED COMPLETELY IMPOSSIBLE. THIS NETWORK WAS ORIGINALLY ESTABLISHED BY OXFAM AND UNILEVER, TWO VERY UNLIKELY BEDFELLOWS. TEN YEARS AGO, WE DID A LITTLE PILOT PROJECT AND MANAGED TO GET THEM WORKING TOGETHER. NOW, TEN YEARS LATER, THEY HAVE A BOARD-TO-BOARD STRATEGIC AGREEMENT TO COLLABORATE.

not just buying some food from a local farmer here and there. What would it take for a sustainable food system to become the mainstream system?

So here was a group from *business*, a remarkable group, which has given rise to similar collaborations around the world. Today many things have happened which I would have previously considered completely impossible. This network was originally established by Oxfam and Unilever, two very unlikely bedfellows. Ten years ago, we did a little pilot project and managed to get them working together. Now, ten years later, they have a board-to-board strategic agreement to collaborate. Unilever is one of the biggest multinational food companies in the world with all the problems that go along with that. A lot of Americans don't necessarily know Unilever, but you know their brands: you know Lipton Tea, you know Bird's Eye, and you know Ben and Jerry's. Oxfam is one of the most respected and well-known social justice NGOs in the world, particularly in Europe, where their campaigns around poverty have had a big impact. The whole Fair Trade movement really got its lift from Oxfam. This new board-to-board strategic agreement with Unilever is focused on

demonstrating the viability of "small-holder models" in global agriculture, that is, how could the global sourcing of food no longer be a relentless process that drives farmers into poverty, as it has been worldwide for half a century?

While local sourcing of food is great, it's a fantasy to think we're all going back to having all our food come from 50 miles from where we live. We do not live in Tuscany. It would be nice if it was Tuscany, but it's not Tuscany. Moreover, the economies of many countries in the developing world are now very dependent on export markets for their agriculture. So for all kinds of reasons, it's silly to think that the future is only local food. Probably there should be and could be a lot more of it, but there's also going to be global food sourcing.

But how could you have global food chains that did not drive farmers into poverty? Instead, can there be global food chains based on networks of small farmers who can be successful in innovating to the standards of global multinational businesses? That is the focus of this new board-to-board agreement to collaborate, which would have been unthinkable five years ago. No one would have thought that there would be anything like that.

Unilever recently announced on their website the intention to source all inputs to all products sustainably by 2020. Unilever does not have a history of being a particularly innovative company. It's changed totally in the last ten years in large part because of the partnership with Oxfam, and because of efforts of people like Adam Kahane to get people actually working together doing this.

Systems thinking in primary and secondary education

The last story I'll tell you is about kids, younger kids, because the third cluster that we brought together were people transforming primary and secondary education, one using art and the other "systems thinking." The second group is also one I have known for over two decades.

I believe human beings are systems thinkers; I believe we're *born* systems thinkers. I believe as young children we demonstrate unbelievable insight into how the system called a family works. Right? Think about it, how is it that the two-year-old controls the family?



**I BELIEVE HUMAN BEINGS ARE SYSTEMS THINKERS;
I BELIEVE WE'RE BORN SYSTEMS THINKERS.**

But, then, something happens to us when we go to school, and our innate ability to understand interdependence and change, our innate ability to be in a state of awareness of the unfolding of things, our innate ability to really sense how systems around us are functioning, is no longer cultivated. The best analogy I can use is to imagine a world where no kid ever had a musical instrument. There would not be a lot of musicians, even though we have enormous innate potential – every one of us – for music and many of us are really gifted. But if you never had an instrument, none of that latent ability would ever develop. Children are natural systems thinkers, but with no instruments, the ability does not develop. When you see them with their instruments, it's astounding. I've seen high school kids do work that's more sophisticated than doctoral students. I've seen many small-scale examples of this potential; they are key now, like all the exemplars, in getting this work to a scale that can matter more broadly.

Today, that scale is forming in a small group of schools, particularly in Tucson, Arizona, where there is a critical mass of schools based on continuing the natural process of human beings growing up with an awareness of the interdependency of their world and themselves as the person being aware.

The two are actually inseparable. This is always one

of the subtleties of the systems perspective. It's not just about seeing systems out there, it's about seeing myself as inevitably a part of that system. That's what Humberto Maturana, the famous Chilean biologist, calls the "systemic systemic" shift. So "systemic systemic" means the world around us is an interplay and continual dance of interdependence that we're also part of. You cannot be a systems thinker without being a thinker, of being aware of your own thinking.

And by the way, Maturana's institute, called [Matriztic School](#) of Santiago Chile, was one of the co-hosts of this gathering, along with Otto Scharmer and the [Presencing Institute](#), and SoL, the [Society for Organizational Learning](#).

In the Department of Education today, there's a wonderful group of people, who really care about fostering innovation in public schools, even though it's really hard to bring about these kinds of changes when you're sitting in a place like Washington, DC. Recently, I invited the woman who's responsible for what they call early childhood education (birth through second grade) to visit a young kids' school in Tucson. She happened to have a trip out West so she said she would do it. When I saw her about two weeks later, she was glowing.

Coincidentally, one of this woman's mentors happens to live in Tucson and happens to have worked with this school. (I find that when you're doing things that are working, there are all these weird coincidences happening all the time. I've been living in that intensely now for the last three or four months since we had this meeting in Mexico.) So they went together to this K-2 school, where the kids are five to seven years old. The school is in an old building. It's built around a little courtyard, so it's really lovely with nothing fancy about it at all.

When I saw her, I asked, "How was your visit to the Borton School?" And she said, "Ahhh, I never knew that a six year old could reflect!" She said, "You know what I saw? At the end of every day the kids – six year olds! – would get together and stand in a circle. Then they go hour by hour through the day, and if they were learning a lot they stand really tall. If they didn't learn anything they get down on the ground, and if they were in between they kind of hunched over. Then they talk about what was going on with them from 9 to 10 or from 11 to 12 that caused them

to learn like that.” She was incredulous. “These kids are learning to reflect on their learning day-by-day, minute-by-minute, and that’s how they learn.” What really struck me about this story is that this is a lady who’s not unsophisticated regarding children and their development. She’s responsible for early learning in the entire country, and it was shocking to her to see how naturally and deeply young children can reflect on their own learning.

I had visited this same school two or three weeks earlier. I brought a little group with me including a woman who had hosted our meeting in March in Mexico. She runs an amazing program that’s now in about two-thirds of the schools in Mexico, which are very traditional in their style. The teacher is the authority, kids are mostly passive. This woman, Claudia Madrazo, has introduced a program where, for one hour a week, the kids get to ponder a work of art. That’s it! It is a sort of Trojan horse program – because the real goal is to train teachers to be different. The teachers are trained in a very elegant way to simply step out of the way, put up a work of art, and just be there with the kids. The Trojan horse aspect is that this exercise is teaching the teachers how to be in a totally different way with the kids. Of course, to ponder a work of art is one of the simplest reflective practices possible because the whole point is: what does it evoke in you? What are your feelings, what are your thoughts? What are the stories? And that happens for one hour a week, that’s all. This program now operates in a great many schools in Mexico (80,000 teachers have been trained); the Minister of Education has just said it should be in all the schools. So this program, DIA, Developing Intelligence through Art, is also one of the exemplars.

So Claudia, who is herself a pretty amazing educational innovator, and I were visiting the schools in Tucson. In one classroom, we were with young children who had visited an archaeological dig, and they had done a system diagram of what causes an archaeological dig to “have value or not.” It was very elaborate; it had about 25 different variables all laid out in a very orderly way. The children were explaining about how the value of the site is affected by what happened there historically, by whether or not the site is well protected, and so on. One woman with us was a philanthropist who funds a lot of archaeologi-

WHAT IF BECOMING AWARE OF OURSELVES AS A LEARNER WAS THE FOUNDATION FOR OUR LEARNING, FOR OUR SCHOOLING? WHAT IF BECOMING AWARE OF OURSELVES AS A MEMBER OF A COMMUNITY WAS A FOUNDATION OF OUR SCHOOLING? THAT’S WHAT THEY MEAN WHEN THEY SAY “SYSTEMS THINKING.”

cal digs, and she says, with her jaw dropped, “I spent twenty years learning what these three six-year-olds have just explained to me in ten minutes! How do they understand this?” By the way, although the educators call what they do “systems thinking,” you could also call this reflective thinking. What if becoming aware of ourselves as a learner was the foundation for our learning, for our schooling? What if becoming aware of ourselves as a member of a community was a foundation of our schooling? That’s what they mean when they say “systems thinking.”

Just a little later three boys said, “We have a problem because we’ve been having fights on the playground.” So they quickly sat down and did a little system diagram of what causes them to get angry. And they identified three or four places they had been trying to intervene in this system. They said, “We tried just saying ‘I’m sorry.’ That works a little, but we’re not convinced it works very well.” Keep in mind; these are six year-old boys. They’ve got a diagram of what causes them to have spats on the playground, and they’re sitting there reflecting on the different things they could be doing to not have that happen. They suggested two or three other interventions, which they said they’re going to be trying the next time it happens. Those of us visiting felt like we had seen something very special – the beginnings of Maturana’s “systemic systemic” shift in education.

I’m telling you these stories because I know of no other way to quickly get to the heart of this, and I hope this has succeeded in doing that.

Insights

Marianne Knuth: Peter, you’ve got about four minutes left. And I’ve loved listening to your stories about how you brought these people together. I was wondering if you would end by sharing some of the insight that came out of knitting all those stories together?

Peter Senge: Yes. There are two, maybe three, basic insights.

First, I have no doubt that the changes needed in the world are happening. I have no doubt. Over the past several years, I've been involved in initiating a lot of stuff. It's really clear to me now that I don't have to bother with that any more. It doesn't mean I'm sanguine that our world is going to be transformed. I'm just saying the changes needed are happening. They're emerging all around us.

Second, Otto Scharmer was the first person I heard state a kind of a proto-principle, certainly something worth pondering. He said, "Fundamental changes always emerge from the periphery; they don't emerge from the centre." You're in a business or an organization, and you're waiting for the CEO to lead the change. But the real changes are occurring out in the field. They're initiated by people doing something really different. The Borton School is a 90% free and reduced lunch school; these are not upper-middle-class kids. These are Hispanic and Native American kids. That school had the lowest performance ranking possible for a K-to-2 school; it now has the highest three years later.

So, the changes are occurring. Look to the periphery. Look away from the centres of power. For me personally, the obvious thing is that it now is the time to look, to watch what's emerging, to leverage it, and to disseminate it.

SO, THE CHANGES ARE OCCURRING. LOOK TO THE PERIPHERY. LOOK AWAY FROM THE CENTRES OF POWER.



We brought the people together for them to meet each other, feeling that there were deep similarities in how they do what they do. None of those people had ever met each other, and you can imagine what it's like when you get a group like that together. You know, they almost didn't need to speak. Molly Baldwin brought her Tlingit training, and we started every morning with smudging and a circle. Everybody felt very natural with that, even though many of them had never done it before. It didn't matter. Because for each of them, there is real clarity concerning the connection between their deep spiritual practice and what they were able to manifest in the world. Of course their spiritual practices differ a lot. They have different heritages, different traditions – it doesn't really matter. But they know that they're doing what they're doing because something is being unleashed in the depth of who they are and how they connect with each other. And they are *extremely* pragmatic people.

You can imagine if you worked in these settings – this is not a nice little romantic adventure. You really focus, focus, focus on what produces results. When people visit Boston, I've said, go hang out with Roca. Don't listen to me, just go be there. Listen to one of those 17-year-old kids who would probably be dead today talking to you about his or her purpose in life. You'll get it very quickly. You'll understand what it takes to transform systems.

So, I think the knowledge is all around us today. But we have to pay attention to it, and we have to know where to look, and how to look. As Otto says, look in the periphery. And look to the connection between the deep inner changes and new disciplines for how to translate inner work into manifest results. And when we find real living embodiments – people being the change they seek to produce - of this know-how, then we have to find how to support it, connect it, leverage it, and disseminate it. This is the focus of the new Academy for Systemic Change, the joint project that has emerged from the Yucatan Meeting.

We're just at the beginning of the beginning. In the world as a whole, things are getting much better, and things are getting much worse. Welcome to the era of transformation. ◆◆