



CHERYL ROSE

Centred at the Edges

Some Thoughts on Reflective Practice
and System Entrepreneurship

WOLF WILLOW
INSTITUTE FOR SYSTEMS LEARNING



Watch a tightrope walker, just before she moves from the solid platform to the edge. She pauses. She often closes her eyes. She breathes deeply, and she becomes...still.

Look at her closely, and you'll witness her then work to centre herself, to become deeply aware of her internal state – physically, mentally, emotionally, and perhaps even spiritually. She is concentrating on herself as well as her surroundings. Preparing. Watching. Waiting for signals that she is ready and the moment is right. And then, she steps forward; aware, attentive and alert, moving purposefully along the narrow rope, high above the ring.

I've never walked a tightrope. But I intuitively see why all of the above is critically important. Neither am I an expert on reflective practice, although I am quite familiar with it both personally and professionally. My career has been focused on designing and delivering various forms of education to support individuals and teams who work passionately for social and environmental change – system entrepreneurs. These are people of action, and my work has been to create learning environments that encourage deep connections between learning, thinking, being and doing – which requires the purposeful practice of reflection on self and circumstances, conscious meaning making, and thoughtful consideration of the implications of these understandings.

For me, that tightrope walker embodies the critical value of reflective practice. And I can't help but wonder why the internal centredness that is so obviously valuable for that kind of edge walker is not more widely viewed as absolutely essential for system entrepreneurs who learn and work at the edges of what they know and what they can imagine about working for a better world. The edges that demand experimenting with radically new mindsets and strategies. Edges that require showing up as whole as possible.

The edges of what is now – and what could be.

With stakes so high, it's time to prioritize **reflective practice** as fundamentally important to the ultimate goals of system entrepreneurs – **transformative social change**.



Defining Reflective Practice

There are many definitions of reflective practice, and it is central to a number of learning, development and/or contemplative traditions. It has deep roots in the field of adult education and various related learning theories. It is central to all effective forms of experiential education, including service – learning, outdoor education, transformative learning, and more. It is integrated within a variety of martial arts. And, naturally, it is incorporated within spiritually based concepts and practices such as prayer, vision quests, mindfulness and meditation – foundational to many traditions. Some common elements across these views and approaches to reflective practice include:

- * Creating space and time for the practice; this includes quieting, observing and/or focusing the mind
- * Connecting the practice to learning for understanding and action

- * Relating the practice to deepening self-awareness
- * Making distinctions between 'reflection in action' (in the moment, real time – forms of reflexive practice) and 'reflection on action' (reviewing past experiences and bodies of knowledge)

Over time, a diverse set of individuals has referred to what we can call reflective practice – Confucius, Dewey, Kolb, Lao Tzu, Covey, to name but a few. The specific terms 'reflective practice' and 'reflective practitioner' emerged in the 1980's and are attributed to Donald Schon who worked in the field of professional learning processes in organizations. He found that intentional, conscious reflection was central to how successful professionals performed, learned and improved at what they do. Schon wrote that, *"the practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behaviours. He carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation."* (see The Value of Reflective Practice for Partnership Brokers)

Educator, Gillie Bolton, offers additional nuances to definitions, writing in 2009 that reflexivity deepens reflection through an in the moment capacity for *"focusing close attention upon one's own actions, thoughts, feelings, values, identity, and their effect upon others, situations, and professional and social structures. The reflexive thinker has to **stand back** from belief and value systems, habitual ways of thinking and relating to others, structures of understanding themselves and their relationship to the world, and their assumptions about the way that the world impinges upon them. This critical focus upon beliefs, values, professional identities, and how they affect and are affected by the surrounding cultural structures, is a highly responsible social and political activity."* (see Reflection and Reflexivity)

When I relate these rather technical, academic definitions to what I know of the experiences and contexts familiar to many of the system entrepreneurs that I have worked with over the last twenty years,

I immediately sense the relevancy of key words like *'surprise, puzzlement, confusion, uncertain.'* I also agree with Schon's descriptors for what's required in such challenging contexts; *'reflects on prior understandings and behaviours, experiments, generates both a new understanding... and change.'* Bolton's unpacking of reflexive thinking also rings true because it is clear that system change leaders are most effective when willing to consciously challenge their own assumptions, beliefs, values – all that they've internalized from the systems they want to change. This is very complex work – and in that deep complexity lies 'the edges' I mentioned earlier – the uncertain, high potential spaces that system entrepreneurs regularly operate within, by choice or through emergence. Reflective practice is often how they intuitively manage to make the most of those change spaces.

But again, I wonder, what if they relied more purposefully on practices focused on growing their own internal complexity? What potential might that hold for enhanced impact on our most pressing, complex challenges?

Reflective Practice for System Change Leadership

A quick search on the internet for anything connecting social change and reflective practice yields a surprising number of resources. From health care to social work, from social entrepreneurship to partnership brokers, within governments, businesses and the not for profit sector, the topic of reflective practice is on the radar, with people articulating its necessity and value in this increasingly complex world.

In a December 2017 article entitled, “The Overlooked Inner Life of the Systems Entrepreneur”, Doug Balfour writes that reflective practice allows you, *“to ask yourself hard questions without letting yourself change the subject.”* Referring to recent high-profile examples of ethical failures in established leadership, from business to government to the entertainment



industry, he states that more than ever, there is a definite “*need to address fundamental issues in our own internal world before trying to fix the one around us.*” He argues that inward focused reflective practice is absolutely necessary for individuals and/or organizations to be capable of developing the unique skills and particular mindsets required for the emergent, uncertain contexts that system entrepreneurs work within. Balfour writes that reflective practice can help these leaders to achieve a level of **internal** self-awareness that only then allows them to skillfully act for change **externally**. Here are some of capacities that he ascribes to regular reflective practice:

- * Dealing with stress in uncertain contexts
- * Acknowledging and learning from criticism
- * Knowing your own limitations and looking to others to lead, when required
- * Building trust across difference, through revealing your own authenticity
- * Identifying blind spots or assumptions
- * Managing your own and others’ egos in highly diverse collaborations

But Balfour’s ideas on this are not new. Ten years earlier, authors Westley, Zimmerman and Patton wrote “Getting to Maybe – how the world is changed”, speaking directly to the need for reflective practice for those who want to truly make a difference. In a chapter entitled “Standing Still”, they counsel their readers to “*make reflective practice a centerpiece of your action and build your skills in this area.*” They describe the combining of deep reflection with action as a critically important habit to cultivate. Their rationale for reflective practice is that it effectively supports leaders to achieve system change impacts through:

- * Enhanced capacity for pattern recognition and analysis
- * Understanding system dynamics and complexities
- * Tracing and making sense of historical development of strategies and initiatives

- * Testing underlying assumptions of long-established practice – imagining new approaches

Getting to Maybe was written partly in response to the question, “*Is change possible?*” The authors acknowledge that the kind of change we urgently need to see become real in the world can feel like an overwhelming task – it can feel impossible. But this cynical viewpoint is, in their words, “*the easy way out.*” System entrepreneurs seldom accept the option of the easy way. However, the reality is that these individuals are, after all, mere human beings. They need incredible internal fortitude to keep carrying on in the face of very troubling realities. How, then, to not only build unique skills for new ways of doing and to hold complexity mindsets for new ways of thinking, but to also nurture new ways of being? Reflective practice is fundamental to building the self-awareness and internal strengths to challenge personal assumptions, manage despair, maintain hope and seed imagination.

Joanna Macy is a researcher, educator and writer concerned with the internal life of change makers. She is widely recognized and revered for her work to encourage a revolution in human consciousness that will more deeply connect humans to our planet and save the Earth and its peoples from environmental destruction. A book that she co-authored in 2012 with Chris Johnstone, called “Active Hope”, attempts to offer practical processes and activities for ongoing personal development for those who care passionately about social and environmental justice.

Macy asks that we begin by intentionally reflecting upon our fears, to thereby weaken fear’s negative impacts. She advises this specific first step in managing overwhelm; deliberately ask yourself, “*What troubles me about what is happening in the world?*” She then instructs readers to, “*make time to courageously listen to your response*”. This type of inner dialogue is surely an important form of reflective practice, with specific goals to listen to truth and build the ongoing internal resilience of system entrepreneurs. Macy believes that, “*When we bring our fears in the open, they lose their power to haunt us.*”

Macy and Johnston also suggest using reflection as a means to cultivate what they call *"a mindset of gratitude"*. They state that a grateful mindset can better support the following:

- * Training the mind to notice opportunity
- * Increasing capacity for generosity which strengthens relationships
- * Encouraging our own meaning-making
- * Helping us to deal with our despair for the world's problems
- * Maintaining our energy and enthusiasm
- * Liberating our imagination

This final point around imagination seems particularly important in these times, and for the kinds of transformative change goals held by system entrepreneurs. Macy speaks to *"practices that help us to catch inspiration"*. Here, she strongly encourages cultivating the habit of *"creating space for our minds"* to make sense and to dream. She sums up her thoughts on this with, *"The core principle here is that we don't have to just passively wait for inspiration; rather, we can play an active role in inviting it in. We can also train ourselves to become better at this, developing the habit and skill of tuning in to visionary signals....to catch and anchor inspiration."*

These authors and educators join experienced change leaders and others in an emerging movement, encouraging regular, intentional reflective practice to strengthen capacities for the complex task of leading for transformative social change.





The Forces Against

There can no longer be any doubt that reflective practice is immensely valuable to the impact potential of system entrepreneurs; this acknowledgement is very good news!

But the news is not all good.

Because it immediately begs the question of why reflective practice is nowhere near front and centre in the everyday activities of most of these leaders. In my own experience as an educator and coach to hundreds of system entrepreneurs, I witness that even when we know the value of reflective practice to be absolutely true, the fact is that, generally, we do not do it nearly enough to reap the benefits. I use 'we' because I, embarrassingly, have to include myself in this statement. So, what is this irrational disconnect all about?

Perhaps, it's a matter of culture. The social change/social innovation eco-system is permeated with certain cultural elements

– consciously or unconsciously held beliefs – that, frankly, work directly against regular reflective practice.

Some of these are described in “Getting to Maybe” when the authors state that many who engage in working for social innovation “*take pride in impatience*” because, understandably, they know that there is so much to be done and they feel that there is no time to waste. Throughout the book, these authors underscore a cultural belief that time for thinking is a luxury and that the only thing that truly matters is action. While many may argue that, of course, thinking IS a form of action, under the constant pressure that is the system entrepreneur’s reality, the time necessary for reflection and meaning making slips away.

There is also the relentless quest for answers and the impatience with questions, seeing these as a hurdle to get past. Reflective practice can be difficult and discouraging because, at first, it often serves to reveal more questions than answers. Then, we’re called to spend time with those questions, to welcome them and to explore them fully. This can be hard to do. And, returning to Joanna Macy’s lessons, honest questioning reminds us of the pain of the world and reveals our own deeply felt grief, anger and fears. These can be the hardest of all to hold.

Finally, even should we overcome all the above obstacles to reflective practice, there is the eternal enemy of time. Across most of the world, we are living at an accelerated pace that leaves little room for stopping and thinking. There is a cultural bias towards always dancing as fast as we can. In fact, it would seem to be now one of the highest measures of our own worth – to be flat out busy, all the time, never daring to stop. On this point about our relationship with time, this anonymous quote that I came across years ago has provided me with food for thought. Whatever your personal beliefs about this story from the Christian faith, I believe there are universal lessons in the metaphors it holds:

If as Herod,
we fill our lives with things,
and again with things;
if we consider ourselves so unimportant
that we must fill every moment of our lives
with action,
when will we have time
to make the long, slow journey
across the desert as did the Magi?
Or sit and watch the stars
as did the shepherds?
Or brood over the coming of the child
as did Mary?
For each of us, there is a desert to travel.
A star to discover.
And a being within ourselves to bring to life.

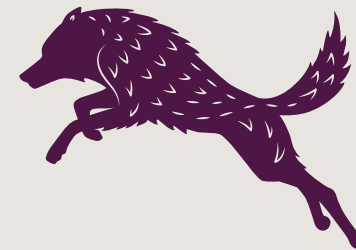
Making the Case for Reflective Practice

I continue to wonder what it would take for reflective practice to become a widely accepted norm for those who are leading system change. My reflections surface these kinds of questions:

- * What if system entrepreneurs were supported to continually build their capacities in the realm of reflective practice? What would that look like? Would it be different in different contexts, for different groups? What cultural considerations are necessary?
- * How could you measure the impact of reflective practice on individuals? On relationships? On communities? On issues?
- * What if individuals, organizations and funders prioritized reflection as one of the keys to realizing their common passions for change in the world? What would be the incentives for them to do this?
- * What if broadly accepted and consistently practiced reflection – on our inner world as well as the external world – is a missing ingredient in system change strategies? Who thinks this is true? Who would work to seriously explore this further?
- * Who feels called to enhance the efforts of the emerging movement that believes reflective practice is key to impactful leadership for the changes we want in our world?

These are only some of the questions that call out for attention; they string together to form one of the edges of our knowledge and understanding in the social innovation field. While new concepts, tools, strategies and processes will, admittedly, always be very useful for impact out in the world, there is more need than ever to attend to the internal realities of those who are learning the concepts, picking up the tools, designing the strategies, and leading the processes. Are they offered time to become still? Have they learned how to respond and relate in deep complexity? Can they, confidently, be aware, attentive, and alert as they step to the edges?

System entrepreneurs courageously step right to the edges of *what is now – and what could be*. They need to be supported with time, learning and mentorship to embrace reflective practice so they're able to do inner work for complex personal development – because this, ultimately, enhances our collective efforts to ensure the well-being of people, communities and our planet.



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