

Transformational Imaginations To Build Strengthsⁱ

Venkat PULLA¹

About our ability to predict futures:

Something common to Meteorologists and Futurologists is a constant struggle with predictabilities. Both use the expression 'may be' a lot. Mal Warrick, Author and Public Speaker, asserts that 'Humankind's track record in envisioning its future has been extremely poor' as we continue to live with 'complex systems that guide our lives'. We appreciate that even the very best of motives can lead to outcomes that we never considered, such as heroin, originally invented as a way to cure people of addiction to morphine. What else could we do in such cases other than accepting such factual inventions as results of the Law of Unforeseen Consequences? (Warrick June, 16, 2006)ⁱⁱ

As Homo sapiens we expect our lives to continue along pretty much the same lines as they did in the past, relentlessly. We don't particularly relish change or expect it, and struggle with nature and history as both hardly open out in straight lines. And yet we expect to live along the lines of a mythical human construction called consistency. We are unanimous about in our expression of dis-ease at the sight of interruption and change that rule our universe. And yet we exercise our choice to blink at these two phenomena. Blink is an apt description, just that short moment when you don't see and despite being awake to realities that are around us. We manifest our disagreement with change through bodily reactions such as stiffness of neck or rashes and redness on our face. Apply the same analogy further and take it to social groups, organisations and nation states – that 'blink' manifests as situational reflux and acquire a variety of forms. Protests, mass hysteria, misguided patriotism and anything that we would not like to explain by using the law of unforeseen consequences. This is where Mal Warrick stops and I wish to begin my series of conversations with you. I am here like many of you deeply involved in trying to make things work on the ground. But like some of you I gave my time and gave myself the permission to dream and to envision a different kind of future.

Time will perfect some of my thoughts, dreams and visions. When I lift my head I can see and grasp several possibilities for positive living and positive change. Change is right here for those individuals, groups, organisations, public, private or non-profit if they believe in interconnectedness of the human species. Complex challenges of today exceed the capabilities of any single individual's coping. No group can survive on its own. No organisation's public, private, or nonprofits can hang on to a statement for survival independent of each other or journey their own way to strengthen their aspiration, and goals. There is no myself without you. *Martin Luther King summed it up so beautifully. When he says 'I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be'.* This is the 'interrelated structure of reality'. It is about interdependence. Signals of the world are different now, the dangers greater, and our old system of unconscious adaptation has reached its limits. Perhaps it is time we thought differently. And it is time we act differently. In this first conversation with you I hope to sharpen some of my thoughts.

Relevance of Gandhi

We are meeting in the land of Gandhi. He said 'be the change you wish to see in the world'. Focussing on building Strengths in individuals, groups, communities, organisations and society at large is the only way one would challenge the existence of deficits. But surely we start with the strengths. To Gandhi's India, this is not a new technique or a body of knowledge. Gandhian values of self reliance being the primary one. Gandhi in 1921 wrote in

¹ Director: Strength Based Strategies, 2006 Conference, and President Brisbane Institute of Strengths based Practice, 5 Mandell Close, Coopers Plains, Qld 4108 Australia email:dr.venkat.pulla@gmail.com

Young India that he 'considered removal of untouchability as a most powerful factor in the process of attainment of Swaraj or self rule for India.

What is it that I could say in a land of Gandhi, and to this audience? Apart from reiterating that the core values that actually constitute the basis for strengths based practice are from Gandhi?

Being fair and respectful to all; focussing on strengths; assisting a self directed change to make changes that are meaningful and significant to them and reflect on how they want their situation to be.

While the above appears to be a shade simplistic of what is being canvassed as strengths based perspectives, those elements provide the context for community engagement practice in today's western world. To be retold that the power within in the strengths based practice gave India its independence is something that would make every South Asian in the audience feel proud of their common struggle for independence in the Indian sub continental region. Inherent and crucial in this practice was the element of morality and ethics that Gandhi espoused, practiced and went on non violent hunger strikes when other followers differed with him in practice. Means of achievement were as important to him as ends. Gandhi recognised that no one could develop the other unless there was a struggle within the oppressed to develop and grow. Gandhi saw the dominated people also as alienated people; India of the bygone era presented a clear pathology, a picture of people living outside the margins of the villages as victims of social disadvantage. Their apathy, fatalism and even indifference required much needed attention and in his opinion were more important than liberation from the foreign rule. (Pulla Venkat R 1987)ⁱⁱⁱ

Partnering for Societal Development

It is a tribute to Gandhi that he applied only positive thoughts and positive strategies across a wide range of our social institutions. What we see in today's business leaders turning to welfare and greater good of the society such as George Soros, Bill Gates is a yearning to give back to the society from where they received a great deal. In giving they are growing. Indian business houses such as the Tata's pioneered this trend in the last century. The first business families to join in a movement that looked after each other's interest.-Workers and Owners. Peter Drucker talks about the growing popularity of "today's business/nonprofits partnerships leading the biggest change in philanthropy since the rise of the foundations some 100 years ago, he eludes is a shift from philanthropy to investment. – However it is my belief that a true strength based partnership to build communities that are healthy, businesses that are growing and societies that are peaceful one needs both public and private enterprises together with the non-profit sector into building both social as well as physical infrastructures Quality education, health care, housing, economic development, culture, sports, civic and environmental improvements need to be seen from a human rights perspective. There is no government on earth that can meet the demands of its people when certain sections of the society keep to themselves a lion's share to themselves. Strength based partnerships to build the world would subscribe to what Gandhi often used to say. 'There is everything here for everyone's need but not enough for some people's greed'.

A 'Rights' Question

What use is it that societies produce so much wealth yet continue to allow more than one half of Homo sapiens to live in sub human existence? We belong to a great majority of the human species that 'blinks'. Period. We only differ in matters of degree and length in our blinking. My colleagues and country men from Australia can vouch that even in the great western world we have badly managed and frugally funded initiatives that consider the poor, that reach their marginalised and their disabled members of their societies. That wealth is simply not there in their governments.

Who should ensure that fair treatment of human rights? Police in our societies? National governments? Another foreign body -a well paid competent ombudsman belonging to a body like United Nations, whose competency in overseeing is negated each and every day by the big bulls and hawks that believe 'some men and some societies are more equal than others? Who will enforce those rights and duties in a civil society?

While we deliberate on the intricacies of this process the marginalised truly support themselves and empathise with each other much better Changes that sweep in when the socially disadvantaged take agenda into their hands will paralyse our eyes and we may need to elect yet another body reaction if we do not become aware and support and speed up sensible strategies in the 'rights' side direction. Here are two instances from not so distance past of expressions of solidarity of those who were disadvantaged and their acts of empathy to each other.

They know how it felt, and now they're reaching out to those going through it. Insafi Gulo was asleep when the Tsunami rocked Indonesia and the five-story building collapsed, trapping her beneath piles of rubble. She eventually freed herself, losing her right foot in the process. Far from being down, a year later, she's goes all the way from Indonesia to help Hurricane Katrina victims, ripping out drywall and hammering nails in devastated communities along Mississippi's Gulf Coast. They're a team of eight, who, having witnessed international relief firsthand, are now reciprocating with some of their own. That is just one way of keeping our eyes open. What are they teaching us? About sharing and about love perhaps. Are these strengths? Undoubtedly they are and contentment to this half the world population that lives in poverty has these remarkable values amidst their greatest strength the resilience to be. To dare to live.

Every year, 'Teen People' an organization honors '20 Teens Who Will Change the World'. This year's (2006) list includes 19-year old Given Kachepea who is helping illegal immigrants who have fallen prey to human traffickers. Molly Farrell who bounced back from a paralyzing swimming accident to raise \$285,000 for Christopher Reeve Foundation. Fareh Ahmedi who published an autobiography chronicling her experiences of losing a leg in a landmine and most of her family to a rocket in Afghanistan and a Cody DeWitt who made a documentary after learning of mother's diagnosis of cancer.

A parallel thought in between:

The meaning of life is to find your gift; the purpose of life is to give it away. --*Joy J. Golliver*. Is that it? Yes. It is.

Where are we leading this to? Strength based partnering initiatives geared towards meeting the major societal development issues namely reducing gross inequalities fostering social integration? And assisting each other in finding ways and means to reduce the impacts of every day stresses. It is better to look suffering straight in the eye, acknowledge and respect its presence, and then get busy as soon as possible focusing on things we choose to focus on.

Two parallel thoughts in between:

Man can no longer live his life for himself alone. We realize that all life is valuable and that we are united to all this life. From this knowledge comes our spiritual relationship with the universe. --*Albert Schweitzer*

and 'when we grow in spiritual consciousness, we identify with all that is in the world -- there is no exploitation. It is ourselves we're helping, ourselves we're healing' (*Dr. Govindappa Venkataswamy USA*)

Making choices of peace and happiness

Therese Jacob-Stewart (2003)^{iv} has been asking one question for a long time. 'What do we want? Happiness and when do we want it? Now, if not yesterday'. Therese continues to ask 'how many people do you know who actually experience happiness and peace regularly as a way of being?' Does any one come to your mind? By the way are you on this list?

Peace and happiness are powerful choices. Mind you, if you make this choice, it is possible, that in this journey, you may be out of your comfort zone; you might actually see more distress, turmoil, sadness and may even feel a shade more depressed. This is where you need to think what needs to be done. 'Obstacles don't have to stop you. If you run into a wall, don't turn around and give up. Figure out how to climb it, go through it, or work around it'. (Michael Jordan-while coaching kids 2006)

Making the choice of peace and happiness is like making a choice of cleaning my house or my garage. Last week I was running crazy, working well beyond 17 hours constantly per day. I made that choice too. I gave myself permission to exercise yet another choice. I have books everywhere in my home and heaps more in my garage. A Typicality of a former academic clinging to his deeper self. I know many of you will relate to that. This happened, when I was looking badly for a reference book in the garage, a tin can fall on me and there was a lot of clutter that followed that fell through too. Junk collected over the years. All I did was move some of that from one place to another and pick up this very appropriate reference.

I was brooding over it for sometime, looked around, surveyed it and did nothing about it. But I closed my eyes and started imagining that a whole lot of people passed through my garage. I am sure they must have had some pleasant comments. I hate to think negatively even about their comments! Some of that wandering started hurting me, when I imagined that all those who passed through my garage may have construed that I was rank lazy. At a rational level I thought it was none of their business. It was my life style or choice from a previous clinging. I pretended because I did not hear, from them before. That's right they did not say anything to me. If they did it would have been confronting. I also did not hear because I did not say this to myself these two years. I am sharing this in confidence with you today that I have made a brave decision to throw that clutter after this Conference. Period. What was that due to? A transformational imagination?

Transformational Imaginations

I invite you to see if you too could feed transformational imaginations. (TI) Mere imagination is meek. Mere imagination is like a mirage. Transformational imagination is something that builds on what you are, what you have today and what you wish to have tomorrow.

Now I figured out what I am saying. Transformational imagination is a process. A series of conscious steps, contemplative yet strategic, purposive but not bland. I asked a colleague if he would try. He did not want something extraordinary as he believed in small steps. Baby steps. He agreed and spoke to me that he imagined a crater full of flora and thriving green. He was ecstatic about this and was pretty clear not to budge from the scene.

For a moment I thought I am losing my ability to conceptualise and I thought may be my skill are rusted a bit – a bit as I earn my basic bread from a government and as most people agree we have some meaningful struggles to remain creative within in or rank powerlessness. I thought to myself about his baby steps and I like baby steps. The process of transformational imagination expects you to pause, take a deep breath, an extra moment to refurbish your brain with some prior knowledge that you read a long time ago. I realised quickly I could wear a jumpsuit as facilitator and ask him a question. That did the trick. In this scenario my colleague recalled that he read about volcanic activity causing craters at the place of previous imagination. After all what would a kiwi miss in Australia? That little bit extra greenery. I summed up and realised kiwis had more general knowledge than Australians.

Transformational Pausing

The process of transformational imagination involves pausing. That pause will allow you to absorb a different fact and a different seismology of that place. Pause in life. Try that every moment. No, you would not become lazy. Don't take my garage too seriously. That will pass soon. On the contrary through the process of pausing you will become methodical, learn to understand and value the difference between what you have and what you wish to have. It is your 24 Karat key to your change. The change you want to be. It provides impetus to your personal transformation and provides you other keys for your organisation or work place.

I suggest that transformational imagination (TI) is a process of looking into the unconscious thoughts. I don't see unconscious thoughts as negativity. I don't see them as issues that you need to suppress and never talk about. I see them as an explored countryside. There is no need for fear to explore this unconscious for the fear of your privacy from your partners, loved ones or even your best friends. For, to start with, if they are your people and there is that interconnectedness, they will remain with you. It is you who needs to make that first step. To be brave, and to bring the heroic in you, that accepts the challenge and puts a step forward to pick up the transformational threads. Your key Potentials: Your hitherto unknown cues for the future. Who cares if predictive scientists and artists do not predict human happiness? You do now.

TI surfaces true self

This is what Carl Jung called 'shadow' –a part of ourselves that we tend to submerge while we are still breathing on earth. Potential self contains shadows. It actually contains your true self. Transformational imaginations (TI) unearth that true self and assist you to begin your journey. Carl Jung goes further to explain that 'realising the shadow also gives us a practical problems'.^v What do we do with muddy waters? We filter, and sip. This analogy may not work with most people as they tell me they drink only when doctor prescribes or they had a good time a day night before and are dehydrated for the day after. Fair enough, you can buy bottled water every where, but wouldn't drink until you are thirsty. This is when you will find your road. And when you find it your true self has already surfaced.

A parallel thought in between:

Wanderer, your footsteps are the road, and nothing more; wanderer, there is no road, the road is made by walking. By walking one makes the road, and upon glancing behind one sees the path....

Anotonio Machado^{vi}

As a final script to this conversation, I would add from an audio clip that I surfaced recently about a young Positive Psychologist Tai Ben Shahar^{vii} who is making a difference in Harvard University. His messages are very simple. Shahar urges:

- that firstly we need to give ourselves permission to be human. When we accept emotions -- such as fear, sadness, or anxiety -- as natural, we are more likely to overcome them. The suggestion here is that rejecting our emotions both positive and negative, actually leads to frustration and unhappiness.
- Happiness lies at the intersection between pleasure and meaning. Whether at work or at home, the goal is to engage in activities that are both personally significant and enjoyable. When this is not feasible, it would be worthwhile to consider what Shahar calls as 'happiness boosters', akin to descriptive narratives or moments throughout the week that provide us with both pleasure and meaning. As we all know that happiness is mostly dependent on our state of mind, not on our status or the state of our bank account.
- Barring extreme circumstances, our level of well being is determined by what we choose to focus on (the full or the empty part of the glass) and by our interpretation of external events.

- For example, do we view failure as catastrophic, or do we see it as a learning opportunity? Shahaar is saying the simplest things that we know but he said them very nicely

While some parallel thoughts are occurring to you let me change the pace of our conversation with something that happened in my previous trips to India.

Several years ago, a few friends of mine travelled to India. One of them returned to her country away with what she saw in India. She saw gross inequities. She saw an ever-growing burgeoning population. She saw the contrasts of people and carried with her some powerful imagery, in mind, in photographs and in audio and video modes. She left nothing to chance. She also took with her some satisfying imagery of the contentment amidst poverty. She had profound images implanted in her brain about the simplicity of the rural folk and the uncomplaining attitude of those tribal women, who were building roads in Rajasthan. Two yards away on the same road that woman worker left her little child right in the sun with a piece of torn cloth as a sun shade. This hardworking woman impressed her. Ungrudgingly she smiled and gave my friend a lot. She smiled at her while my friend was feeling sad for her plight and that of the child in scorching sun. That one smile impacted on my friend. She returned to her country privileged by the lessons of patience and calmness and serenity and did not write a single story on emaciated cows being worshipped, some poignant photography of half burned dead bodies at Varanasi or about anything else that she felt very strongly about. She filtered her imaginations to give her self an opportunity for positive thoughts and did not want to download into a penguin or a pelican paper back of unchecked tourist impressions.

The balance sheet for cross cultural understanding is. One smile. 11070 US dollars to be precise, and a brand new video camera, confiscated by patriotic duty bound Indian customs officers. No reasons told and never returned the camera. Not to her in this life. In time and future, two women will never meet.^{viii}

The key is to Simplify, what we see. What we need and manage what we can.
There is no reason to feel ashamed about our inabilities to manage empires.
There is no reason to raise our expectations in every human endeavour so high that we forget who we are and what we can do with the clay in our hands.
There is no reason to be generally, too busy, trying to squeeze in more and more activities into less and less time.
Quantity influences quality, and we compromise on our happiness by trying to do too much.
Express gratitude, whenever possible.
We too often take our lives for granted. It is time that we begin to learn to appreciate and savour the wonderful things in life, from people to food, from nature to a smile.
Finally welcome aboard: Your Conference on Strengths based Strategies 2006 has just begun. I am grateful to you for this conversation and to the divine providence.

i

This is a draft only Speech notes delivered on 10, November, 2006 at the Strength Based Strategies Conference 2006 at Hyderabad, India. Please do not quote without writing to the author.

ii Mal Warwick - Jun 16, 2006 8:05 am Social Edge
Author, consultant, public speaker

iii Pulla Venkat, Working With Rural Poverty Groups, (Pages 89) Hivos, Netherlands, Utrecht, 1987

iv Stewart-Therese Jacobs, "Paths are Made By Walking", Warner Books New York 2003

v Jung Carl (The collected works of CG Jung, Volume 5 and 9 Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1966

vi Machado Antonio, Spanish Poet, Essayist and dramatist- a translation- Selected Poems of Antpno Machado, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979

vii Audio from NPR "All Things Considered" (March 22, 2006) – The Secret to Happiness

http://www.npr.org/dmg/dmg_wmref.php?prgCode=ATC&showDate=22-Mar-2006&segNum=7&mediaPref=WM&sauid=U971939001148017696515&getUnderwriting=1
Javelined Jaffe, PhD
www.LemonAidCounseling.com
818.971.7175

file:///C:/Custom%20Websites/Jaelline%20Jaffe/Harvard.htm (3 of 3)5/2 0/2006 6:37:32 PM Further notes:

The most popular course at Harvard University this semester teaches happiness. Positive Psychology, a class whose content resembles that of many a self-help book but is grounded in serious psychological research. This course has enrolled 855 students, beating out all other classes. 35-year-old Tal D. Ben-Shahar, the lecturer, describes how students might increase the likelihood of transformative, positive experiences through exercises that vary from cultivating a sense of gratitude for the beautiful things in their lives and meditation, to taking the time to really listen to music. I read about this young Lecturer, and he has some powerful messages for all of us *Tal Ben-Shahar (March, 2006)*

^{viii} Currently I have not obtained my friend's consent to talk about a large number of her useful images. I have withheld identification details.