

Dancing Lovingly with Communities

Ken Hubbell

An essay contribution to
Conversation 2014

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GHC Conversations

Annually, Gary Hubbell Consulting convenes and hosts a small hand-picked group of social sector professionals for three days of intense dialogue and critical thinking. We strive to create a thought-provoking, mind-opening, and stimulating conversation about the social sector, philanthropy, and leadership. This deep exploration of the nature and challenges of the environment is intended to engage, inform, and inspire senior leaders to be catalysts for change in their own organizations and communities of influence. With each GHC Conversation, we seek to establish the seeds of a continuing and enriching network that nourishes us as individuals and helps each of us change how we converse, inspire, and seek new dimensions of impact.



Participant Bio

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Ken Hubbell is Founder and President of Ken Hubbell & Associates (www.kenhubbell.com), a consulting firm based in Little Rock, Arkansas. Established in 1992, the firm of Ken Hubbell and Associates (KHA) specializes in organizational development, change coaching, and strategic planning. Clients include charitable, regional and community foundations, nonprofit organizations, city governments, state and federal agencies, educational institutions, and select private companies.

Ken Hubbell has twenty years of experience developing resilient organizations and communities. KHA specializes in highly visual strategy tools and systems thinking. Ken has a wide range of experience with multi-stakeholder collaboration, social innovation, economic development, and equitable approaches to grassroots civic participation and poverty alleviation. He has worked in urban neighborhoods, rural regions, and in Namibia (in southern Africa).

His foundation clients include W. K. Kellogg, Northwest Area, Winthrop Rockefeller, Walton Family foundations, the Foundation for the Mid South. He provided unpaid strategic assistance to the Arkansas Community Foundation as it refined its community partnership strategies. Hubbell provides on-going consulting and coaching services to national nonprofits including MDC, Inc. in North Carolina, which provides wise strategic thinking to the field of philanthropy.

Ken has experience designing social solutions to complex problems (Native leaders and private foundations collaborating on social enterprise and governance in Indian Country across the upper Northwest; empowering vulnerable communities to redesign the future of their neighborhoods; and coaching collaboration among diverse stakeholders to accelerate Latino student success across the U. S.), adapting whole systems to organizational strategy (ecosystem and force-field mapping, scenario building to rehearse futures and test strategy for foundations and natural resource, health, arts, and food relief organizations), and facilitating new leadership development and learning for social sector organizations in Canada and the U.S.

Ken is the author of *The Art of Change: A Handbook for Leading Effective Social Change* (2012) a *Field Guide to Community Coaching* (2010) and "What's Love Got to Do with Philanthropy" and other insightful scenario essays on the future of nonprofit organizations for monographs edited by Gary J. Hubbell focused on discovering new meaning in the application of philanthropy in our times (<http://www.garyhubbellconsulting.com/ghc-conversations/ghc-conversation-2012>).

This is Ken's sixth *GHC Conversation*.

Dancing Lovingly with Communities

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Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and right doing,
There is a field. I'll meet you there.
When the soul lies down in that grass,
The world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase "each other" doesn't make any sense.
Mevlana jelaaluddin rumi-13th century¹

¹Retrieved 12-19-13 from worldprayers.org/archive/prayers/meditations/out_beyond_ideas_of_wrong.html

Figuring out right action or right doing requires us to follow our heart.

The Community Context: Steadily Evolving Living Systems

The context for social and community change is a natural place, often one that also supports people and economies. These complex living systems are highly interconnected. To affect something in a living system it is best to get to know it deeply, to identify leverage points and seek to learn from the changing patterns of the system over time. We can't force or expect a system to behave on our terms or in our timeframe no matter what kind of pressure is being applied by our organization, our leaders, or our funders. Undertaking skillful and effective change in communities requires leaders to be constant learners because we rarely can be sure that we know enough about the system's components, relationships, and time horizons to predict success or outcomes from our interventions. We have to be respectful, humble, and open to the consequences of our actions. In the words of an experienced system thinker, we have to dance with communities.²

Toward what lasting difference should we work?

Success would look like resilient, caring communities where people are healthy and feel at home. To ensure that more communities are viewed that way by their own residents, we clearly must close gaps and accelerate improvements by

- Reducing inequality and vulnerability
- Increasing the range of opportunities and plugging people into the best ones available
- Improving access to health and
- Opening up creative and untapped potential for every person.

What is the current situation for most communities in the U. S.?

It is impossible to capture simply the breadth of possibilities and challenges that are unfolding in communities. However, several disconcerting trends suggest that the uneven economic recovery has increased long-standing social imbalances. We have a reinforcing set of hard problems that have been distressingly resistant to our best attempts to solve them:

- We have almost 48 million Americans getting food benefits—they are often hungry.
- Almost 50 million people (including those dependent on food assistance) are considered poor, which covers almost 17% of our citizens—they are economically very unstable. This was clearly summarized recently in the *New York Times*: “Despite a half-century worth of technological progress and some fairly robust economic growth for much of that time, the labor market does a worse job lifting people out of poverty today than it did before Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon.”³
- Overall child-well-being has stagnated since 2002...the economic recession of the past few years effectively wiped out all of the gains we made cutting child poverty in the late 1990s.⁴
- The level of Americans who have been unemployed for six months or longer is almost 36% of the total unemployment. New studies discovered that in “a weak job market long-term unemployment tends to be self-perpetuating...the very fact of their unemployment made it very hard to find a new job.”⁵

²Donella Meadows, “Dancing with Systems,” *The Systems Thinker*, Vol.13, No. 2, March 2002, page 2.

³Eduardo Porter, “In the War on Poverty, a Dogged Adversary,” *New York Times*, December 13, 2013.

⁴2001 Kids Count Data Book, Annie E. Casey Foundation, Summary and Findings, page 32-34; downloaded from www.aecf.org

⁵Paul Krugman, “Writing Off the Unemployed,” *New York Times*, February 9, 2014

- Access to health insurance and care is now in the process of being extended to a large slice of these folks but estimates are that 20 million remain without insurance even after the Affordable Care Act is fully operational and several states health care payments and prescription costs are expensive for many working families.
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported in 2011 “progress on certain objectives **but less than adequate progress toward eliminating health disparities for the majority of objectives among segments of the U. S. population** (especially racial/ethnic).”
- Other government safety net programs are under funding pressures, many have been reduced.

These feedback signals indicate the country is facing multiple limits in our current systemic responses to providing access to health and well-being. Clearly, what we have is a set of cascading system failures; our typical responses look like “fire-fighting.”

What could be the wisest and most skillful response to catalyze action leading to caring and lasting impact in communities?

In a macro sense, the wider situation suggests a more integrated and systemic response is in order. Considering the continued weight of the vulnerability, we need a blend of the rational and the ethical. What works and what creates the most good for those who are struggling? For individual leaders the question is: what is the highest of my own understanding? For groups, institutions, organizations, firms and agencies, the guiding question is: what is the highest and best use of our resources, ideas, and energies that produces the most good –especially for those most vulnerable?

Parker Palmer calls this “wu-wei, rightly understood – action that is harmonious with his own reality and the reality around him.” He suggests a simple four-part framework to help us determine and execute “right action”⁶:

- **Motives:** Every action has some motive behind it, some impetus, a force field out of which it arises. If we do not explore that force we will never act in a transcendent way.
- **Skills and Gifts:** An authentic spirituality of action will celebrate our desire and capacity to co-create the world with the gifts we have been given. Palmer emphasizes the inherent tensions: “in order to gain the strength that comes from knowing our gifts, we may have to fight the ego’s drive to dominate our lives.”
- **The Other:** Every action, Palmer notes, is a dynamic meeting between an individual and an other. This means giving up one the most cherished but destructive myths of our technological society – the myth that all things are plastic, malleable, capable of being molded into any shape we require or desire.”⁷
- **Results:** Palmer suggests that “right action is a process of birthing that cannot be forced, only followed.”

Like Palmer, who shines a bright light on the pivot of motives as a driver of Wise Action, many ethicists emphasize a similar focus on the power of intention as a key determinant. “The individual’s overall state of heart and mind, or motivation, in the moment of action, is generally speaking, the key to determining its ethical content.”⁸

⁶Parker Palmer, “The Woodcarver,” in *The Active Life*, Harper San Francisco, 1991, pages 58-75

⁷Palmer, op cit., page 69-70

⁸Dalai Lama, *Ethics for the New Millennium*, Riverhead Books, New York, 1999, page 31.

Buddhist practitioners frame the path to skillful, lasting action by linking it harmoniously to intention and discernment that produces insight.

“Action, like View and Meditation, does not stand alone. Action without clarity of view is blundering and apt to cause more harm than good. And action without meditation tends to be speedy and complex, rather than spacious and simple. But if these three factors are in balance, clarity of view and meditative awareness permeate all our activities.”⁹

What would an ethical, holistic approach look like in practice? Are there some ethical principles to help?

Discerning real right action that improves communities requires leaders to move past “can we do this?” to “should we do this?” It seems that we got sidetracked by utility and a desire to at least get something done. There is a difference between efficiency—what some scholars refer to as rational action-- and that which is also morally right. There seems to clearly be a morally and socially “right” set of actions that a person can intuit as criteria for Wise Action In Community. In their *Defense of Utilitarianism*, C. L. and Quingai Sheng explained

“One the extension from utility for the agent to social utility has been established, we are entitled to say that the bridging of the is/ought gap in moral actions is also by definition. That is, we deliberately call these actions that maximize social utility right actions.”¹⁰

Thus, we can see the underpinnings of wise and right action in ethical philosophy, Christian and Buddhist ethics, and even in commonsense principles for community development.

To figure out what action is both good and right, contemporary philosopher Philippa Foot echoes the right moral actions platform of Sheng and Sheng when she argued there was no criterion for practical rationality that is not derived from that of goodness of the will.

“For surely human beings, who are capable of judging which states of affairs are better and which worse, could never be right to choose to produce a worse state of affairs when they could produce a better? Mustn’t they always choose the better over the worse? To this one should reply roundly that it is no doubt a truism that they should act as well as they can. And there is also no doubt often a place for an enquiry, somewhere within morality, for a question about which action will have the best consequences on the whole, given, for example, that the end is to relieve suffering or to see that justice is done.”¹¹

Christian ethics

Most Wise Action reflects basic Christian ethics, and illuminates the ethical principles of servant leadership, especially that which aims at social justice for those in need. “What is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God. (Micah 6:8, King James Bible).

In this biblical passage, “good” is framed in very intentional, yet simple terms: care about what is just, be compassionate and merciful toward others, and live with humility as a servant of God. Pursuing a clear path toward what is the very best you can envision that is good for people and this earth. Such an ethical path reinforces the vision of putting the spirit into action.

⁹Judy Lief, “Back to Basics: Is Meditation Enough?” *Tricycle* collection; retrieved on 6-3-2013 from <http://www.tricycle.com/special-section/back-basics-meditation-enough>

¹⁰*A Defense of Utilitarianism*, C. L. Sheng, Quingai Sheng, Millburn, NJ, University Press of America, 2004; Page 181.

¹¹Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2001, location 808 in Kindle edition

“Jesus teaches us to pursue the life of heaven now and also then, anticipating the day when earth and heaven are one. Honest business, redemptive art, honorable law, sustainable living, medicine, education, making a home, tending a garden— they’re all sacred tasks to be done in partnership with God now, because they will all go on in the age to come. In heaven, on earth. Our eschatology shapes our ethics. Eschatology is about last things. Ethics are about how you live.”¹²

Wise and just action is built on a scaffolding of conscience. Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas described just action in *Summa Theologicae*. Aquinas described laws and action toward ends that broadly fulfill the common good, do not exceed the authority or reach of those who direct or impose the action, and do not place disproportionate burden on people in the community.¹³

A branch of Christian social gospel is still influential in mainline U. S. congregations. A Wikipedia entry noted In the United States, the Social Gospel is still influential in mainline Protestant denominations such as, African Methodist Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church USA, the United Church of Christ, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and the United Methodist Church; it seems to be growing in the Episcopal Church as well.¹⁴

Buddhist ethics

There is an integrated approach in classic Buddhism that can help in creating purposeful and skillful action, especially that which expands happiness or relieves suffering for others.” Buddhist ethics inform us that what is ‘right’ is behavior that is helpful rather than harmful, that is conducive to liberation and freedom.”¹⁵ In *Compassion in Action: Setting Out on the Path of Service*, Ram Dass suggested that “compassionate action is not done for others—it is done with others, for ourselves, because we can no longer avoid it. It helps fulfill our lives. It is acting from our deepest understanding of what life is, listening intently for the skillful means in each situation, and not compromising the truth. It is working with others in a selfless way, in a spirit of mutual respect.”¹⁶

His Holiness The Dalai Lama emphasizes a small set of ethical principles that, when diligently practiced, can aid in the transformation of one’s actions so they can optimize good outcomes: virtue, restraint, and compassion. But he counsels that the real challenge is not to view an ethic of Wise Action as merely the acquisition of knowledge, but instead as applied personal transformation so these principles can live through everyday action. “Those who are religiously minded must understand that there is no blessing or initiation—which, if only we could receive it—or any mysterious or magical formula, mantra, or ritual—if only we could discover it—that can enable us to achieve transformation instantly. It comes little by little, just as a building is constructed brick by brick.”¹⁷

Part of putting right action into practice means ensuring that your actions support ideas and directions framed by the local population and do no harm In Community. The Principles

¹²Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*, HarperCollins eBooks.

¹³Retrieved 2-8-14 from <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/kathyschiffer/2014/02/martin-luther-king-jr-quotes-st-augustine-and-st-thomas-aquinas/>

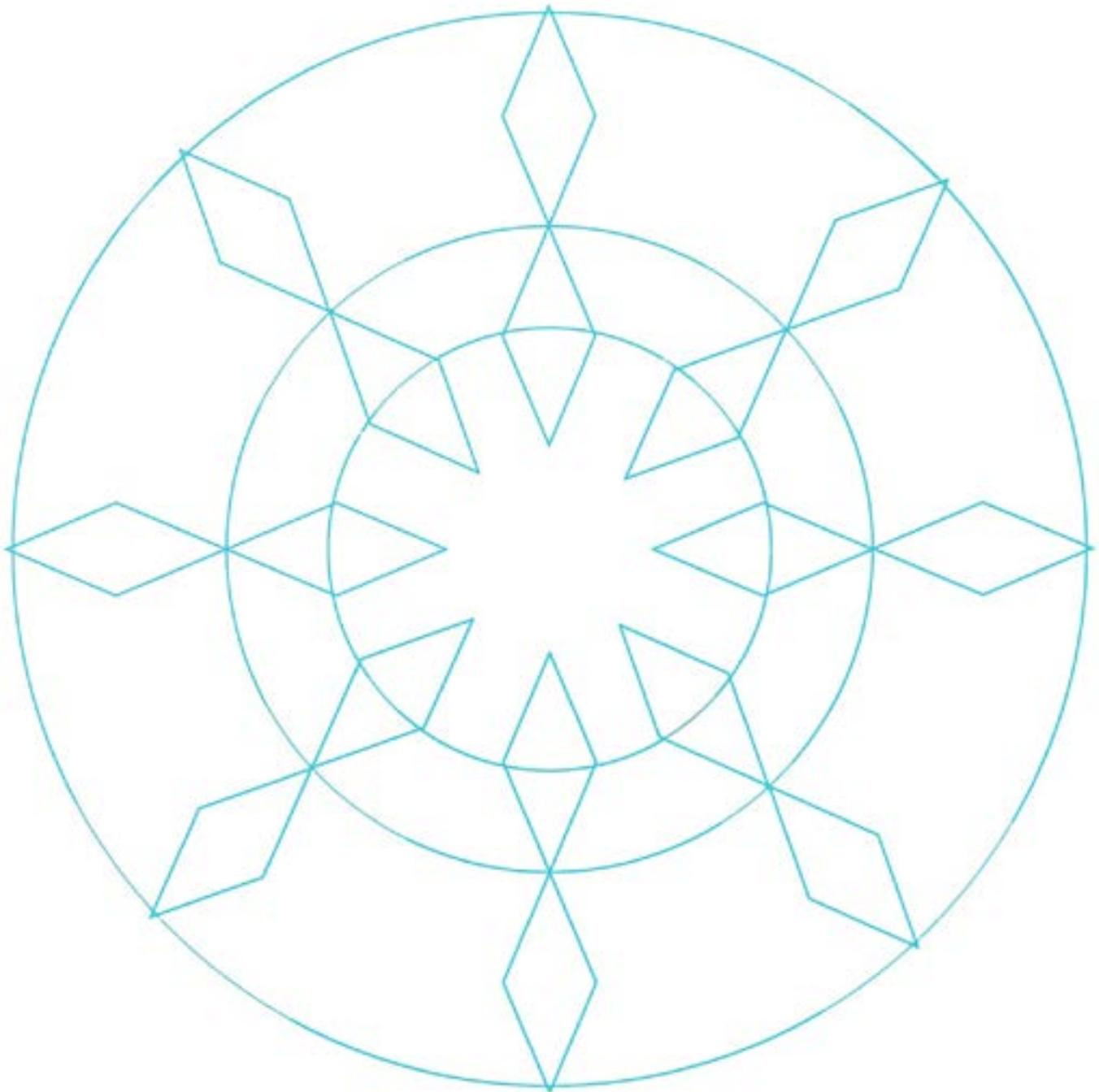
¹⁴Retrieved 2-8-14 from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_Gospel

¹⁵Lama Surya Das, *Awakening the Buddha Within, Tibetan Wisdom for the Western World*, Broadway Books, New York, 1997, page 200.

¹⁶Ram Dass, *Compassion in Action: Setting Out on the Path of Service*, Bell Tower (an imprint of Harmony Books), New York, 1992, Preface.

¹⁷Dalai Lama, *Ethics for the New Millennium*, page 119

of Good Practice of the Community Development Society have withstood the test of time and still provide a guide for sincere and concerted community change that is community driven, respectful of local culture, sustainable, and enhances the local leadership capacity.¹⁸



We can sense an emerging design of a holistic mandala built from the core principles of right action that have stood the test of time across many traditions and practices. We fill in the blanks on the following pages. In many different traditions, mandalas act as visual aids for reflection on an ideal vision, grounded in sacred intent, to restore harmony or well-being.

¹⁸Retrieved 2-8-14 from <http://www.comm-dev.org/>

How do we sincerely work in concerted, compassionate, respectful ways In Community?

We can create a working synthesis from the moral and ethical platform that was highlighted in the previous sections. It is illuminated by love, goodness and goodwill and focused with resolve on fairness and justice. Our opportunity is to make this real wherever we are.

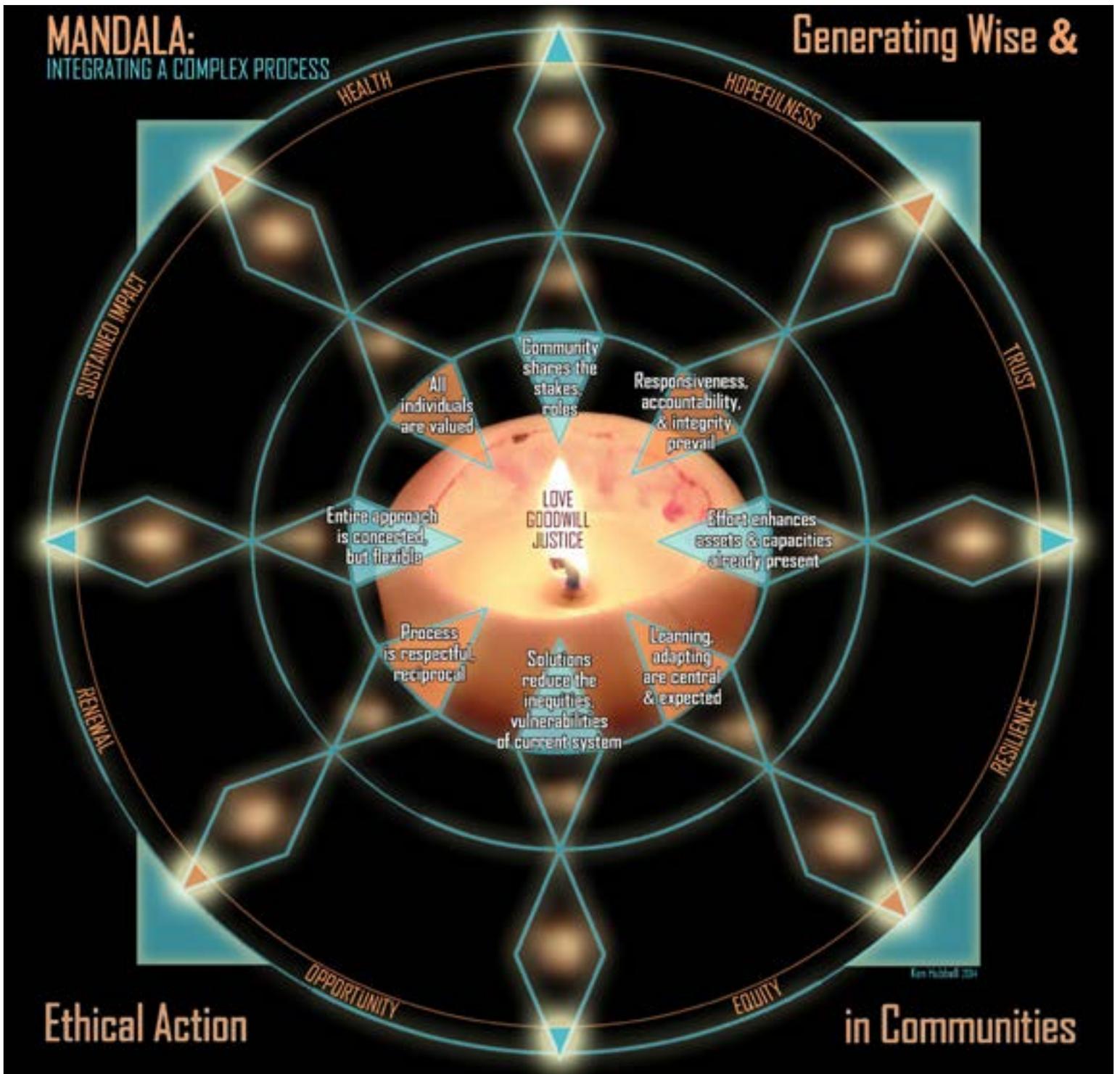
The eight essential principles add detail to our integrated mandala:

- All individuals are valued—voice, history, unique gifts and competencies, potential
- Community must share a major stake in the effort and play vital roles
- Responsiveness, accountability and integrity must prevail
- The effort should enhance the assets (human, social, cultural, natural) and capacities already present
- Solutions should address systemic issues, reduce important inequities and vulnerabilities not merely fix a sorry symptom, no matter how troubling
- Change processes should be grounded in respect and reciprocity
- The approach and action should be framed and coordinated in a concerted manner that amplifies impact and increases learning
- Continuous learning and adaptation are expected, failures will happen, rethinking and innovation will be key advantages

The outcomes produced by organizations paying serious attention to these principles would be resilience and increasing

- Hopefulness
- Health and well-being
- Trust
- Renewal (for people and environment)
- Opportunity
- Equity

Without living the principles, we can't fully generate the outcomes we are seeking. An illustration follows that fuses the light of love with the integrated principles to illuminate a path to right action.



Change-making as a Koan for Leaders

We have much work to do. We will have to stay awake in the face of daunting uncertainty. It feels like we have reached a leadership koan for our time-- an intentional expression of opposites we are challenged to dissolve, that we can use to shape discernment and spiritual practice. How we “be” with it is as important as what we “do.” We can think of “one of the central functions of the koan as being to illuminate and then deconstruct our habitual tendency to dualistic thinking in all the ways we dichotomize our life.”¹⁹ We won’t be able to turn or run away from the common dilemmas that arise when we confront questions related to right action In Community.

1. How can we dissolve the apparent contradictions In Community improvement? Our temptation is to focus on small models in the face of wicked problems. To adequately address systemic challenges (improving health, access to quality affordable health, food, and higher education, etc.) demands decades yet resources and interests are narrow and often support only short-term solutions that aren’t fully effective or sustainable.
2. How can we confront our own blind spots? Confronting our own assumptions is critical for transcending barriers to effective change. Just because we care doesn’t mean our “way” forward is the right or most skillful way. Even a clear theory isn’t sufficient to catalyze lasting change. It usually requires collective action and learning from many partners.
3. How can we implement our solutions and not get so attached to them that we can’t see other alternatives. How can we avoid becoming blind to our own contradictions? One path for leaders is to loosen our attachment to success and failure and hold the “brand” lightly: it is in service of a greater ideal. Many organizations carry out their missions, yet can’t move the needle on the social change they wish to see. Many also create visions for their organization, but don’t purposely describe the future conditions beyond the boundaries of the organization they hope will follow if their organizations grow to be world class or highly effective. Take time to answer and discuss the “so what” or “to what ends” questions. Be sure to see if your programs are making a visible down payment on the preferred future vision.
4. How can we find inspiration when the gap is often so large? Despite small success stories and important gains in important indicators, generally, the situation is stagnating for a large chunk of Americans. How shall we continue chipping away in the face of system feedback suggesting our approaches are insufficient to fundamentally alter the outcomes? The opening is for an inventive overhaul of many of our social strategies. It is important to replace discouragement with fresh thinking and a loving embrace of new concerted engagement and ideas. When your faith, practice, and feedback systems are working, right action will feel “right.” This creates an opening for spaciousness, gratitude, and energy in the work.

Leading into and through dilemmas and continuous complexity will be the backbone for wise and right action. Taking as a start the essential principles from the Mandala, we can sense one way forward. As we extend our programs or services into community:

- Are all individuals valued? How well have we ensured that their voice, history, unique gifts and competencies, and potential have been incorporated?
- Does the community share a major stake in the effort and play vital roles?

¹⁹Barry Magid, “Uselessness: The Koan of Just Sitting,” *Tricycle*, Fall 2013; 34

- Are we truly responsive and accountable? Are we acting with integrity?
- How well does our current effort enhance the assets (human, social, cultural, natural) and capacities already present in the community?
- Do our solutions adequately address systemic issues, reduce important inequities and vulnerabilities not merely fix a sorry symptom, no matter how troubling?
- Have we grounded our engagement in respect and reciprocity—where each stakeholder is seen as having something to contribute as well as something to learn in the process?
- Have we framed and coordinated the approach and action in a concerted manner to amplify impact and increase learning across the community?
- Can we really adapt to unexpected changes and failures with innovation?

Dancing our Way to Wise Action

It is important to hold a view or generous mental model to locate Wise Action. Putting the Mandala into action requires taking one step at a time in exquisite relationship with community. As Ronald Heifetz reminds us we “need to sense the dancing space of others nearby to stay off their toes.”²⁰ Donella Meadows captures the loving attitude toward community complexity and shines a light on the dance floor of community change for all of us. It helps answer the mystery of the Rumi poem at the beginning.

The Dance²¹

1. Get the beat
2. Listen to the wisdom of the system
3. Expose your mental models to the open air
4. Stay humble. Stay a learner
5. Honor and protect information
6. Locate responsibility in the system
7. Make feedback policies for feedback systems
8. Pay attention to what is important, not just what is quantifiable
9. Go for the good of the whole.
10. Expand time horizons
11. Expand thought horizons
12. Expand the boundary of caring
13. Celebrate complexity
14. Hold fast to the goal of goodness.

²⁰Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, Belknap/Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1994, page 253.

²¹Donella Meadows, op. cit.



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