



## Too Late to Wait

*by Peter Senge*

*A conversation with the 2001 Authentic Leadership Summer Program Community, Halifax, Nova Scotia.*

### **Introduction**

by Susan Szpakowski

In many ways, Peter Senge's address to the 300 people who came together for Authentic Leadership in June 2001 was one of the most difficult moments in the week-long program. Other than Francisco Varela, Peter was the only presenter scheduled to participate for less than the entire week. Further, his address was on the penultimate evening, at a time when the community had already formed strong bonds and its own culture. Peter therefore entered the situation as a relative outsider. The physical context was also difficult—it was an unusually hot evening and there was no air conditioning in the room.

Three addresses had already been given that week, all in a fairly traditional format, delivered from the front of the room. Peter wanted to try something different. He began with some music and a period of meditation, then by offering some provocative stories and questions. Peter then invited participation, intending to harvest and reflect back the current experience of the program community. He indicated that he wanted to avoid using the mikes if possible and would instead paraphrase people's comments as needed. Passing the mike, he said, could slow down the conversation and narrow the sampling from the field.

The interchange that followed is documented below. From my point of view as a program organizer, it was unsettling to feel the undercurrents of frustration and discord in the room. Later, program evaluations confirmed that, though the evening had been provocative, it had also been "disappointing" for many. I

was happy to let the experience fade into the background of what had been a positive and transformative week.

The switch in my perception began months later, when I was skimming through transcripts of the community addresses, wondering if there were excerpts that could be posted on the website as part of a retrospective. When I came to the transcript of Peter's conversation, I was struck by how engaging and juicy it was, as a documentation of a group of people exploring a living question and allowing the energies—inspiration, conflict, uncertainty—to flow through the room. For me, the transcript turned out to be a hidden treasure of insights and stories, from Peter and from everyone else.

When I asked Peter how he felt about sharing this transcript on the website, he agreed that it could be of value, and he asked me to write this foreword as a way of establishing an experiential context. By chance, our exchanges about this took place just before and after September 11. In the aftermath of those devastating events, I told Peter that I couldn't help but wonder if it was "too late" to counter the overwhelming negative forces in the world through efforts like the Authentic Leadership program. I was alluding to Peter's suggestion near the end of this transcript that positive change efforts may be too late. He replied, as he had in the transcript, that we as human beings cannot really know if it is or isn't too late. But, he added, one thing is for sure: It is too late to wait.

See also Peter's own reflection on this conversation, included below as an Afterword.

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Peter Senge: I'd like to welcome you all this evening.

I don't really have a plan for this evening, but I did think of a couple of stories that might be helpful to start off with. And then I'd like to ask you what the plan might be.

First, I'll tell you about a friend of mine, named Kobutsu Malone, who was featured in a *Shambhala Sun* article a few months ago

[January 2001 issue]. That is how I first learned of him. Kobutsu is an American-born Zen monk, and the article talked about his work bringing Zen practice to prisoners. The article was pretty inspiring and upbeat. Shortly after the article was published, the two of us got in touch. In talking with him, I discovered something disturbing which hadn't come out in the article.

The article described Kobutsu's experiences with different prisoners, and I expected to hear more of these kinds of stories. Instead, I was surprised to encounter someone who was profoundly uneasy about what he was doing. He said, "You know, I have been doing this for many years, and I have always felt it was my life's work. I have struggled to make ends meet. But I'm starting to feel like I'm being co-opted. I've noticed that the wardens really like me. I'm not against the wardens liking me, but there is something that is making me uneasy. I'm starting to see that I am actually part of this system. I make the prisoners easier for the warden. What's really been bugging me"—and I can't begin to capture the anger he expressed, the kind of anger you feel when you discover stuff going on around you that was there all along but that you had been really good at not paying attention to—"is that I'm starting to realize how many companies make a lot of money from the way our prisons work. And I make it easier for them to make money because it is a nice efficient operation if people are into their meditation."

About six years ago, I and a small group of friends had an opportunity to participate in a seven-day retreat in China, with a Buddhist Taoist Confucian teacher. It was a wonderful time. He is a very well known teacher in China, and most of the attendees had been students of this man for 20 or 30 years. He is probably in his mid-eighties now, and he doesn't lead retreats anymore. In the middle of this retreat, something happened that really surprised me. He got angry. Or, to be more precise, he expressed anger towards his Chinese students. He said, "You think you know all about Buddhism. You know nothing about Buddhism. You know about meditation. Meditation is just method; meditation is not Buddhism. Buddhism involves at least three elements. You must have a practice, you must study, and you must serve. If you lack any of those three, you can not claim to be a Buddhist." I was a little embarrassed that evening,

because he then told the Chinese students—who were way ahead of folks like me in their cultivation practice—that if they wanted an example of people who were serving, they should study the Americans who were present.

Over dinner last night, as people were bringing me and my son Nate up to date on what has been going on at this program and touching on different highlights, someone paraphrased a question that she thought had been particularly powerful. It was, "Can capitalism be healed?" This question, which came up in Meg's module, might strike all of you in very different ways. For some people it might be a non-issue, for others it might be the only issue. But it struck me, and I said, "Now that is a real question worth coming together for." Just as Kobutsu's question -- Can the prison systems be healed? -- is a question worth coming together for.

So in part to introduce myself and in part to set the context for a little different conversation, I thought it would be worthwhile sharing with you what the Chinese master had said about the importance of service. It could be service at any level—at the most immediate, local level or at the level of, So what are we going to do about larger systems like the prison system or capitalism?

For many years, those of us working in organizational learning were fond of saying, "A bunch of transformed people do not produce a transformed organization." Something different has to happen. I think that difference starts in the domain of intention. But it also concerns the larger systems that we enact collectively.

I want to toss those little stories and ideas out, to raise the question of, What are we here for? What am I here for? I am not presuming there is a single answer. But I have to say that I don't think a bunch of transformed individuals will transform the way larger systems work. In fact, as Reverend Kobutsu has discovered, it might actually work in the opposite direction, depending on our intention and what we pay attention to.

I feel I need to say one more thing and then I will shut up, because I am a kind of interloper here, landing out of the blue

and not having been here for the whole week—although many of my very dear friends have been. I hope this does not sound like a criticism or that I am saying that something is not here that should be. Actually, quite the contrary. I thought this was a good opportunity to ask ourselves, What does it mean to practice... (you can add whatever word you want). For some people the word would be Buddhism, for others it might be conscious leadership, for others it might be service or cultivation—whatever you see yourself doing here this week in your practice, in your doing—not just in your talking.

So, why is this happening? Why are we here? Something seems to be changing in terms of people creating opportunities for different kinds of gatherings to occur. I'm really curious what your sense of it is. I would like to invite some conversation.

Since I find using the mike often slows things down, please feel free to speak from wherever you are sitting. If I can't hear you, I'll ask you to stand up and I'll just repeat what you say so everyone can hear it. Sometimes things move a little more spontaneously that way. It is also fine if we have some periods of silence. The Quakers used to say, "If what you have to say does not improve upon the silence, why do you say it?" The reason they were called Quakers is because they quaked if they had to say something.

[Comment from audience]

Senge, paraphrasing: I have a belief that transformed individuals can transform an organization or even the world. I think Reverend Kobutsu's story tells a lot. He has been transforming a lot of individuals. So what is missing?

Senge: A heck of a question, isn't it?

[Comment from audience]

Senge, paraphrasing: What if we could change the way we look at organizations. We seem to fight a lot against profit logic, the logic of the business. But perhaps there is something behind that. And if we could see more deeply into what is behind it,

there could be— these are my [Senge's] words now—a shift at a deeper level.

[Comment from audience]

Senge, paraphrasing: I too feel co-opted. I have been working to make it possible for people to find their voice, but now I'm questioning. I came here to find tools to take me further, to make relationships with others that could—my [Senge's ] words now—leverage my efforts.

[Exchange between Senge and participant]

Senge: I asked him, So what have you learned? And he said, I think it is important to go beyond voice to deal with the power relationships that exist in organizations.

[Comment from audience]

Senge, paraphrasing: I came to this program because I'm interested in people like Peter Senge and Meg, who have been thinking about these things for ten years.

By the way, I would be more than happy to share my thoughts on this. I don't mean to step out of the circle here, but it helps me a lot, and I hope it helps you as well, to get a sense of the form of these questions that are moving in us, so it is not just me.

[Comment from audience]

Senge, paraphrasing: I would say one of the intentions behind the Institute was to bring together the organizational learning traditions and skills with the contemplative disciplines, which might create a more powerful force for personal and organizational change than would be possible with either one alone.

Senge, to another participant with raised hand: I'm going to ask you a little more specific question now, if I could. If you could characterize an image or phrase, what do you see or feel

happening here?

Senge, paraphrasing: One of the reasons I came was that it's very unusual to have all the different components combined in one place. This is different from every other seminar I have attended. So learning really takes place.

Senge: So what is your sense of what is happening here?

Senge, paraphrasing: From the day I came until now, I see a sense of cohesion starting to happen.

[Some people ask for mike.]

Senge: Just call out.

Participant with mike: Peter, we are disenfranchised. We are trying to tell you we are not a cohesive group right now because we can't hear a bloody thing.

Senge: Can you hear me?

Participant [cont.]: We can hear you. But we want to hear the original question.

Senge: I understand.

Participant: We want the mikes.

Senge: Here is what I have noticed. I have noticed a lot of words to wrap things up. What I'm really interested in is, what is behind the words? What I'm really interested in is, what do you see or sense is actually happening, in a sentence or less?

Participant: That I'm not part of the conversation.

Senge: Okay. I'd like to hear the voices of quite a few people. I was worried that if we opened it up with the mikes, we would hear from three or four people only. But I actually wanted to get a sense of whole field that is here now. Does that make any sense?

You can go to the mikes. That's fine. But if we could, I'd like to hear from a dozen or so people in the next ten minutes. What do you see is happening here?

Participant: Hope that there is something we can do to make a difference.

Participant: Diversity and discord.

Participant: Breaking the boundaries of my thinking and going deeper.

Participant: I think there is a general arising of passion to serve and then also recognizing the pain that happens when you feel that it doesn't make a difference. That you are just pissing in the wind.

Participant: A lack of cynicism.

Participant: Raising consciousness.

Participant: The answers can come from silence.

Senge: I'll just repeat if I don't think some of you can hear. Please, this is wonderful.

Participant: Strengthened intention.

Participant: I'm seeing that the quality of what can happen in an individual meditation practice is starting to happen between and among people.

Senge: Could you say a little more? I'm really interested. What quality are you referring to?

Participant [cont'd.]: The quality of spaciousness and clarity and awakens and intention that can happen in one's own practice. I'm seeing it starting to happen among individuals and groups here. I think that is what actually starts to change the world.

Participant: Enthusiasm. And the root of the word enthusiasm means "to be with God"—*entheos*.

Participant: The tremendous importance of slowing down, and silence.

Participant: My own personal inadequacy and the incredible difficulty of putting this into practice when I go home.

Participant: But on top of that, a sense of genuineness and commitment to changing the way we feel within ourselves and translating that into how we interact with others and the rest of the world. I've seen a lot of that this week, and it has been marvelous.

Participant: And, observing gurus quietly competing with each other and not discussing the shadow. [Applause.]

Senge: That sounded a little bit like a recommendation. I was curious if there was a recommendation there.

Participant [cont.]: I think it is an observation based on my experience in emergent communities.

Senge: But you have no suggestion? I'm really asking because if there is something that we could be doing differently, don't hesitate.

Participant [cont.]: It was not meant to be a criticism.

Senge: I heard it as a possible recommendation, so I may have heard that wrong.

Participant: I would like to say that, in all my years of being in this field, I have observed from Fred Kofman the most clarity and the most sense of self of anyone who has ever taught me. And I want to thank him for that. [Applause.]

Participant: Extraordinary teaching. To spend fifteen hours with people who are the best in their field and an opportunity to collaborate with other people in those discourses. It has just

been a privilege.

Senge: By the way, how are we doing now? Are you guys [at the back of the room] feeling a little more connected?

[People at the back gesture in the affirmative.]

Participant: We don't serve to be successful, we serve because it is the right work. Anyone who teaches meditation in prison and expects to transform a whole system through that is naive. If that is the expectation, they have to choose other battles. I will elaborate if you like.

Senge: No, I think what you say is very clear and ponderable.

Participant: I think that personal transformation can change the system. I look at Mahatma Gandhi. By going inside and becoming deeply spiritual, he changed and freed a whole nation. I think personal transformation is necessary but insufficient. We need to work on both levels. We need to work personally and systemically, both at the same time.

Participant: I would like to add something about timing. In Buddhism, we say that manifestation is a coming together of causes and conditions. I personally believe, along with Margaret Mead, that small committed groups of individuals can bring about large-scale change. There is empirical proof of this. But we can't forget condition, which is the timing element. So who knows what the right timing is for what karma to ripen. I don't claim to know that.

Participant: I came here thinking that I would gain knowledge from the people who were presenting. That is true. But I have gained incredible camaraderie and wisdom from the participants. [Applause.]

Participant: I want to link to the mention of Gandhi. I agree with what you said, and I want to mention that I see a necessary component to be an increased awareness of integrity. It would be nice to base action on that awareness.

Participant: I want to contribute some questions that have been occurring to me as I have been listening. Under what circumstances can changing individuals bring about significant change in larger systems? And what kinds of individual change are most likely to have significant organizational impacts? If individual values change, for example, under what external changes can these changes lead to sustainable organizational change? As opposed to intentions or spiritual attitude or skills or ideas. There are sub-questions that we might add. Does it matter which values change? Do certain value changes usually have more external impacts than others?

Senge: What is your sense about that?

Participant (cont.: I was offering these not in the spirit of providing answers but in the sense that questions asked with those kinds of nuances might lead to a different kind of conversation.

Senge: They are wonderful questions.

Participant: I came not so much with an agenda, but to play with all these things at the same time, to see what would happen. It has been really fun. I think one of the things I have seen, especially in my module, has been an arising of courage to take what comes from meditation and to honor that that might be relevant in a broader context, even though it might seem very personal. You might be tuning in and becoming a voice for bigger things that you may be experiencing in many contexts. It takes courage to speak that and to engage others in conversation about it.

Participant: I'm not sure why I came; it just felt right. I think it had a lot to do with wanting to figure out how to heal my experience of becoming part of what Western society has allowed to be the healing profession. What I have gained from being here thus far is support for the things that I did intuitively and by synchronicity, and that allowed me to get through that process in a somewhat healthy way. Now I hope to be some kind of authentic leader in making it a healthy and healing process.

Senge: Is there anything in particular that has helped you see what authenticity means for you?

Participant [cont.]: The fact that the theories I'm learning in these modules and module samplers and talks affirm my intuitions about medicine and medical theory, which didn't feel quite right to me. Whether I brought in feminism or Buddhism or shamanism to try to balance out and understand what was missing, in the end systems theory explains it in a business oriented way. It's funny that one would turn to economics or capitalism to justify it. I suppose it is confirming my own authenticity—that what I was feeling wasn't egotistic; it was just a sense that the process I was going through was not authentic.

Senge: Thank you.

Participant: I would like to explore the possibility that your proposition is correct—that transformed individuals alone may not result in organizational change. Let's imagine under what conditions that might be true. One condition, at least, that comes to my mind is that the individuals who go back to their organizations are powerless. They don't have personal power. I believe that if an individual is going to make anything happen in an organization that individual has to have power.

Senge: Can I ask what "power" means there?

Participant [cont.]: An ability to affect change, an ability to mobilize resources, an ability to cause something in the real world to be different after an intervention. So a transformed individual who is powerless isn't going to change very much in my view. He may have good feelings, he may be personally transformed, and he may have personal influence over the people around him—and that in itself is a form of power, I suppose—but I'm talking about needing command of resources, whether it is knowledge, finances, whatever.

Senge: Thank you. Just one or two more. Go ahead.

Participant: You asked why a group of transformed individuals cannot transform a company. You asked what is missing there,

and you suggested it might lie in the realm of intentionality. I think it also lies in the way you frame the question. I notice the impact of your question throughout the room. Transformation is an extraordinarily loaded word. It implies a state of being to which one arrives: "Now I am a transformed individual." I think that's horseshit; it never happens. [Applause.] I think that, especially in the last twenty years, as much damage has been done by using that word as by being silent about it. It has been misused so much. In my own life, I have discovered since I went through the process of doing my best to become transformed and doing everything that was possible to be transformed...

Senge: That it's the same old person, after all.

Participant [cont.]: Yes. And I discovered that I had to allow myself to be in a process of development. It was a deep personal development. It had a sense of temporality in it that I did not normally allow. I had been stuck in a one-dimensioned level of time, which was on my watch, which was linear time. It was as crazy as if I was holding space in one dimension. I had to open up to different dimensions of time, one of which is developmental time, which moves at a different pace. If I could allow myself to hold myself as being in development, then I didn't have to be transformed. And I certainly didn't have to be transformed all the time and in every action. That gave me the space and gives me the space to not hold those judgments against people who aren't transformed. And I think that is the second big negative impact that this thinking has had on the world—that we have set ourselves apart and are deeply judgmental of those people who aren't transformed. [Applause.]

So I had difficulty with the whole way you framed the question. I noticed that when you asked the question, conflict swept through the room. By the way, I am helping to lead the conflict module. There was conflict about how you were going about what you were doing. Some people could sit with and honor the way you were choosing to do it and some people couldn't. That's just the way it is. I could find myself judging those who could and judging those who couldn't. And so what? If I go back into my company and I allow myself to be in development about what it means to be a human being, and I do that inside a different temporality,

then I start to let go of my judgments, because linear temporality is what calls forth immediate judgments. So I allow myself to be with people as if it has already happened. That's where the power of my intention arises.

The last thing I have to say is that the power of my intention also arises from my ability to maintain the sacredness of my own word. And I don't think that is very present in our culture anywhere, and even in this culture.

Senge: Sacredness? Could you say something about what that image means to you?

Participant [cont.]: This comes from many traditions. The first verse in the Gospel of John says, "In the beginning was the word, the word was God, and the word is God." That is also in the Rig Veda, which is five thousand years old. One can wonder whether John plagiarized from the Rig Veda, which says, "In the beginning was Brahman, and Brahman was the word, and the word was Brahman." I have seen the same kind of repetition in African traditions. The power of my word, the power of my authenticity, in my view comes from the sacredness with which I hold it. [Applause.]

Senge: Thank you. [To next person waiting at the mike] Can I ask you a favor? Since several people have asked to speak, could you keep the statements to thirty seconds or less? It is wonderful to hear all of these. If we could keep each one short, it gives us more a sense of us as a whole. That's all I'm after right now. There's no ulterior motive here.

Participant: I had very few expectations coming here to this program. What surprised me was how therapeutic the week has been. It reminds me of several times in my life when I have done a lot of deep therapy work. At those times it is like lifting a lid, looking inside, and saying, "Oh yeah, there is that work that I have to do, and I really must do it." So this week has been like lifting the lid again. Transformation is not a word that is a normal part of my vocabulary, but it seems to me that the place this all starts— before I can go out and do anything in the community, in the organization, or in the world— is with me as an individual.

You really have to do the personal work first.

Senge: Thank you.

Participant: You asked what we see happening here. I have a very simple, heartfelt wish for what I would like to see happening here, which is that many more young people could come together in a community like this to learn from teachers like Peter and Fred and Margaret.

Participant: I want to thank you for your stories. I think there is a quiet terror that I hold, a question in my own being, which is, "Am I anesthetizing myself to fully taking action through a course of contemplation?" I wrestle with this question because of my need for balance. The other day at a meeting, I thought "My God, we are just going to make people at different rungs of the class system more complacent about being in their place." My point is to thank you for raising that possibility. What was it that [Francisco] Varela said? "All we can do is shake each other up a little bit"?

Senge: "Disturb each other."

Participant [cont.]: And what you did was to disturb the place in me that needs to be disturbed. If I have a wish from a community like this, it is that we continue to disturb each other just enough. You hit a disturbing chord that I am very grateful for tonight, and I would love to see that and the question about capitalism explored further at some point.

Senge: If I could make a request for just a few more. I want to get a feel for something else.

Participant: A few years ago, in 1997, I was at the Spirituality and Education conference at the Naropa Institute in Boulder, and a theologian named Vincent Harding challenged all of the participants with this question: "Who is not here at this gathering?" This is one of my questions here, and it is a very big question. I am so impressed and so deeply appreciative of the way this Institute has been able to integrate collaborative learning, or collective learning, with deep personal work. But

there is a larger connective project that I don't understand. It is about asking who is not here and how we weave together different parts of the world, different parts of our community, into this integration. There is a larger project of love that we don't yet understand, to bring more people into this space, of more different colors and more different places. I don't know how to do it, but I think it is something I would like to work on.

Participant: I came here to be stretched intellectually and also to be with people of a like mind. I have been stretched, but I have been more disturbed than stretched. I really am aware of the polite society that I live in and the polite organizations I have worked in. It is wonderful to be with like-minded people whose personalities and egos and beliefs and learnings disturb one another. I didn't expect that, personally. My judgment has come up a lot this week. It has given me cause to look at some of my beliefs. I think that was the intention of this kind of group coming together.

Participant: I was sitting against the wall and trying to reflect, and I don't have an answer to this, but if I go back to my work environment and try to share some of this stuff, it is so hard—the communication between one world and the next.

Senge: Can I just add an underline to that? After twenty years or more, that is an enormously helpful thing to be attuned to. You go back from something like this and you are a potentially dangerous person, to yourself and others. It can be very difficult personally, because there is a part of us that opens up, and we want that part to stay open, and we go into an environment where it is not entirely safe to do so. I'd like to go back to that in a minute, but thank you for bringing it out. I think it is relevant for all of us.

Participant: I feel like I have been in a big bowl of soup—or maybe a pot would be a better analogy. The same ingredients are in the pot here that are in the pot outside, except that this pot is a little more transparent. Here, there is a little more room to see what is going on; it is a little easier. I feel like we have just started to do that and we could probably go a lot deeper with it. That has been of value to me, because I am seeing some

of the subtle ways that I unintentionally do harm—sometimes individually and sometimes systemically. Seeing that helps me become a bit more skillful so that I can do a little less harm in the various roles that I play. At the very least, I am more aware, because of the transparency of the pot, both individually and collectively.

Participant: Intimacy and trust.

Participant: If I may, a Canadian comment. I recognize that it is really tough to go back to an organization, but I collect one liners, and a couple of years ago my kids gave me a T-shirt that I pull out every now and then, when I need to wear it. It says on the back, "If you think that you are too small to be effective, then you have never been to bed with a mosquito." [Laughter, applause.]

Senge: First off, I want to thank you again. I really appreciate people's willingness to just see what is up. Obviously, once we got started, we let the cat out of the bag. There is much to say and acknowledge. In my opinion, it is a wonderful way to spend an evening. I would just love to keep listening. I would also like to share a few things.

I asked a question—I asked a couple of different ones, but they are closely related. This is a question that is real to me. That's really the reason I asked it. It wasn't because I thought it would somehow accomplish something particular, or lead to a particular answer. It is a genuine question for me. I, like most of us in this room—sometimes I think all of us, everywhere—am deeply drawn to, and know that it is essential to do, deep personal work. Nothing else can substitute for that. As Francisco [Varela] said, "There is no free lunch."

On the other hand, I was very touched by my conversation with Kobutsu. I hope he wouldn't mind my sharing it. Please take it for what it was—my own rendering, undoubtedly biased. But what came across in what he said hit me very deeply. Not in the spirit of guilt or, "Gosh, we are just making things worse," We are all colluding all the time. We live in a system that simply works the way it works, and it wouldn't work that way if we

didn't live in it. It doesn't exist apart from us. The very word system is very odd. It appears we are pointing at something. Doesn't it? "It's a rotten system." But, as they say, notice where the other three fingers are pointing. We're it. It doesn't exist without us. If all the human being vanished tomorrow, it would vanish along with us.

The paradox arises, of course, because our awareness is grounded in a very individualistic viewpoint. On the one hand, there are a lot of us. And yet, I seem to have only this one window, these two eyes, these senses, right? Therein lies the paradox, because the system is created by lots of us acting as we do. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why serious personal work is necessary.

Last week, I spent some time with a group of folks from education and business, most of whom live together in a mid-size community in Oregon. The focus was on kids and education. How many of you work in schools? You may or may not agree with me, but I find it the hardest environment that I have had the opportunity to work in. People are committed in a very particular way. I really believe that there is a quality in us that is brought to the surface when we have an opportunity to work with children.. I think it is biological, and I think it is deeply personal. And yet I don't think there is a more dispirited, discouraged group of professionals today than teachers and administrators, particularly in public education. A lot of you raised your hands a moment ago. You may or may not agree with that. But having the opportunity to do similar work in different industry settings, I find that educators are more pessimistic about the possibilities for change than any other group with whom I work.

I would like to raise a slightly different question. It is somewhat here, in this room. I don't know how to phrase it, but I think you'll get the gist of it pretty quickly. What does Buddhism have to contribute towards the transformation of how these systems are working? The only reason I am hesitant about how to phrase that question is because of the word Buddhism. It is the most straightforward way for me to pose the question, but I don't think the question has to do intrinsically with Buddhism. I think it could be, What does Taoism, yoga, or Sufism have to contribute?

You would go on and on with the isms—whatever you identify as a common denominator for deep personal work. And of course that work exists in Christian contexts and it exists in Islamic contexts.

What does that work have to do with a shift in the way our schools could work? Now, I use schools just as an illustration. In many ways I think it is the example that is particularly apropos because there are real needs for innovation there, and there is a real, human connection for all of us. We were all there—we all went to school, together. There may be a few exceptions in this room, but most all of us went to school together.

And we all learned some very basic lessons in school. In many ways, the unofficial curriculum was even more powerful than the official curriculum, what our teachers were trying to teach us. School is not just an educational institution, it is a socialization and cultururation institution. It is where we learn about what it takes to survive and be successful in modern institutions. It is where we learn what is real and what is not real. For example, we learn that authority figures have real power. Who has the answers in school? Who tells us when we have learned? Who ultimately tells us if we are okay, if we have a future, if we are going anywhere in our life? The teacher. That's an unfair burden to put on any human being, isn't it? And by the way, the exact same logic carries over to work. Who sets the goals? Who tells us how we are doing? The boss.

Don't think that kids don't see this connection. How many of you have kids who play video games? How many of you know about video games? If you know nothing about video games, you are missing a big part of the world of kids today. Almost all video games are organized by levels—level one, level two, level three. Kids start at level one and then automatically seem to want to go to level two. Isn't that interesting. No one has to reward them to want to go to the next level. They are intrinsically motivated. So much for needing grades to motivate learning. As you probably know, most of these video games are somewhat violent. In particular, in order to advance to the next level you usually have to kill a particular character, typically an awful looking monster. Do you know the universal terminology, used by kids around the

world, for the character you have to kill at each level?

Participant: The boss.

Senge: Thank you. Yes, during the day, kids around the world are being obedient and following directions from the teacher who has all the answers. Then they are going home and killing a lot of bosses. Interesting.

So, what does Buddhism have to do with this? And again, I'm using Buddhism as a kind of placeholder here. Please, if that is not the word that works for you, put in the word that does. It is the word, in some sense, that describes why you are here.

Most of you were here for the commemorative session for Francisco Varela this afternoon. I think Francisco would say that we have some profound confusions about reality.

How many of you are from business? Okay. Let's start there. How many of you have heard the phrase, the "hard stuff" versus "the soft stuff"? How many of you have heard the phrase, "if you can't measure it, you can't manage it"? Another version is, "people pay attention to what is measured."

Okay, now let's go back to schools. What is happening in schools? I can only speak as a U.S. citizen. But I think this is also pretty accurate for Canada and many if not most of the countries represented here. As far as I know, this is a trend sweeping throughout the industrialized world. What is happening in schools throughout America to "transform them and make them more productive"?

Participant: Standardized testing.

Senge: Yes. Testing. Because if we can't measure it, it won't change. Right? Have you ever stopped to wonder what it really means to measure something? Take profit for example. Profit seems to be an example of a measure that really drives things. But, has anyone here ever seen one? Seriously. Have you ever seen "a profit"? Yes? What did you see?

Participant: I saw money in my pocket.

Senge: But you can have money in your pocket and have a low profit. People steal all the time. Even if that was your money in your pocket, was it profit? Money, cash, is not profit. Profit exists as a convention only. If you look at almost anything you measure, the closer you get to it the less substance it has. Except where you are literally counting items, virtually all measures are based solely on convention. Do you realize that fifteen or so years ago there was a revolution in financial accounting, when people discovered that the way overhead costs were being allocated made a lot of businesses look profitable when in fact they were unprofitable if overhead costs were allocated in what seemed a more appropriate way? This revolution was called Activity Based Accounting, ABC, and today it is widely considered a superior system for many business settings. But the key point is that literally overnight many businesses that were unprofitable suddenly became profitable, and many that were profitable became unprofitable. Because we changed how we define profit. Profit, a force that often appears in business to be more real than people, exists by agreement and convention. Period. Have you ever seen a temperature? Have you ever seen a SAT score? Of course you have seen it written down, right? By convention we agree on how we write it down. But have you ever seen it in the same way you experience cash in your pocket, or a feverish child, or a child excited because she is learning?

I'm making a very simple point. I suspect it may have arisen in at least some of your modules in this past week. A lot of what we call the hard stuff in today's society exists by convention only. It has no substance to it; it has nothing we can touch or experience directly. And yet we think it is what really matters. What is the difference between a test score and a gleam in a child's eye when suddenly an insight clicks? Can you feel, sense, touch, experience the latter? Of course we can, in countless ways. That's the soft stuff, by the way. The hard stuff is the test score. Now, if that isn't confusion, I don't know what is. It's not just confusion, it is deadly confusion.

During the program I was at last week, a vice principal from the

Miami area stood up and said something that most of the people there didn't believe, until it was confirmed by several others. He said, "My second grade son goes to a school that has no recess." They have a thirty-minute lunch and that is it. That is happening to a lot of schools in America. Do you know why? By eliminating recess, and a lot of other related changes, one to two months have effectively been added to the school year. To do what? To teach test-taking skills. Because if the kids don't do well on their tests, budgets are cut and people lose their jobs. That's why they call it the hard stuff. It's what people pay attention to.

How did we get here, to this state of confusion? That is a long story and the hour is late. It is enough to say that somehow, a number produced on a test—at test that is made up of questions that have been researched but at some basic level are arbitrary—is more real than the gleam in an eye. And it is a test that inherently works for some kids more than others—like, kids who automatically retain what they read versus kids who don't retain in quite the same way. Some kids have to be physically moving to understand something, and other kids are perfectly comfortable sitting in one place. Some kids have to have a song going on in order to be open to learning, and other kids need the room to be perfectly quiet. All those differences are out the window because of our confusion about what is real.

By the way, just to leave a thought hanging here, as you walk out the room this evening, as you look around and take a deep breath and smell the air, you might just notice that there is no quantification in nature. You will not find "98.6" in nature. It is a human artifact. There is evidence of counting in nature. A mother hen can tell the difference when a few chicks are not there, so there is something going on that is like counting, but it is not quantification. Don't get me wrong— quantification is a brilliant invention. I am not criticizing it. It is just interesting that we elevate it to being more real than what we experience directly.

By the way, these examples are my effort to answer the question, What does Buddhism have to do with creating a world we would like to live in? It is very hard for me to imagine a world that you and I really want to live in with this kind of confusion about the nature of reality at its foundation. It is very hard for

me to imagine a world that we would want to live in where we have lost the ability to distinguish what is real in our experience from what we agree to by convention.

We need Buddhism, or whatever cultivation discipline we might think of, today because we have an immense and tremendously dangerous confusion about what is real. We think the hard stuff is more real than the soft stuff. Yet the hard stuff, upon closer inspection, has no real substance. And the soft stuff, like excitement, joy in learning, trust and distrust, and love—is what really matters to us as human beings. We need "Buddhism" because we are running modern societies based on profound confusions about reality. This is dangerous.

Let me just try one more example. Do you know what the original idea of an economy is? Do you know why humans started thinking about this? Economics is about means. We talk about the economic use of resources, right? Even in the arts, you will find the principle, "an economy of means," which you and I typically experience as elegance. Doing a great deal with very little effort. Economics is about means. But today we have made it about ends. If that is not a profound confusion, tell me what is. We actually have raised a generation, maybe quite a few, who actually think the aim, the end in mind, is to have economic growth. We have people who think that their job as politicians is to make sure the economy works well. And so do we. We won't re-elect them if that isn't the case. There is nothing wrong with being economically efficient. Efficiency actually is a spiritual value. Remember "waste not, want not." It is a spiritual admonition. But it is not the aim for all living.

Think about it. Perhaps at no time in history have we had a greater capacity to produce change. I can't imagine a time in history when more people experienced themselves in the middle of extraordinary currents of change. For most of history, most people could assume that their children's lives would be pretty much like their own life, a little more or less. I would argue that there are very, very few people left in the world today who make that assumption.

So you might say that we have developed an unprecedented

capacity to produce change, and an unprecedented lack of clarity as to why. We have the most profound confusion over ends and means you could ever imagine. Did you know that there actually was a time when politicians thought part of their job was to help people think about ends? They asked questions like, What are our aims? What really matters to us? What constitutes a good life? Those are not simple questions. They don't have timeless answers, except maybe at some very, very fundamental level. They have to be re-thought, re-articulated, and re-committed to, for people to live together well.

We have forgotten those questions. We have just taken them for granted, whether we like it or not. I'm not saying we all agree with this. I'm not assuming that. I'm just saying, look at the way our lives work. Look at the way our organizations work. Look at the way schools work. You'll find, pretty quickly, an extraordinary loss of capacity to distinguish between ends and means. Now if that is not confusion, tell me what is.

So maybe Buddhism, or whatever you choose to put in this statement, has something to say. Maybe that is part of why we are here. It is interesting, isn't it? Many of us have come to the age of mid-life. (I'm just looking around the room.) And then we get very interested in these sorts of questions. That is a natural process. It is the way humans have been for a long time. The only one problem is that it's too late. It's too late to start. It's not too late to continue. It is as late as it is, as the gentleman over here said a little while ago. But shouldn't it start with the kids? Why isn't asking questions about ends and means part of growing up? Why aren't the questions about what is real and what is less real, what is in our experience, what is in our heart, part of growing up? Do we think the kids aren't ready?

A few months ago, I was in England meeting with people involved in The Prince of Wales Programme on Business and the Environment. This program selectively invites senior level people in diverse organizations —the kind of people the gentleman was talking about earlier, people who have positional power to control resources—to come together for five days to learn about the state of health of our planet. Now this program is trying to come to the United States and some of us in SoL [Society for

Organizational Learning] are helping in this process. This program doesn't just bear Prince Charles' name. He is absolutely committed to it. It is part of his own personal life purpose. At this meeting, I was chatting with His Highness, and he asked, "Do you really think American business is ready for this?" Most of you know how we in the U.S. are viewed around the world on matters of the social and natural environment. It is not favorably. I said, "I don't know in general, but I know some who are. Bill Ford has gone on record saying he hopes to see the end of the internal combustion engine. And he hopes to stay on as chairman of Ford Motor Company long enough to see it happen. But, of course that is not enough to make it happen. It is going to take thousands, millions of people to make that happen. When I said this, he looked at me with an unfathomable sadness in his eyes, and he said, "Didn't we need this twenty years ago?"

I will tell you how that hit me. We are either going to wake up or we are not. And we are going to see that now is the time, or we will not. And no one can say whether it's too late or too early. That is not the kind of assessment that is given to us as human beings. But it probably is too late to wait much more. When Prince Charles said that, I just could feel his heart. So I think it is probably time to figure out what is real and what is not real and to produce a fundamental shift in ends and means.

That is probably enough for one evening. Again, I want to thank you for what you did first, in starting this evening off. I hope you heard my invitation in the way it was intended, which is that now is the time to get to work. And the work is only partially here; it is wherever we live.

Humberto Maturana was Francisco Varela's lifelong mentor and colleague, and he has become a teacher for many of us. He says simply, "There is only one issue in the world today. We will either get at it or we will keep beating around the bush. We have to create a new way of living together. The way we are living together now will not carry us forward." And of course we have to learn to do it first hand. And of course that is why we come together. And of course that is why we do the personal work. And of course that is why we have the conversations that actually go somewhere and mean something to us. Because we can only

learn to live together differently by living together differently. But the living together will start anew in a day or two. And it is not easy. We don't go back changed; we go back just the way we are. And there will be a little part of us that says, "Yeah, but they weren't there, they don't know, they don't sit." Of course, that is the part of us that keeps the way we live together being the way it is now. So, practicing a new way of living together will start immediately.

I don't have a watch, so I'm a very dangerous person. So let's call it an evening. Thank you very much. [Applause.]

## **Afterword**

by Peter Senge

Like Susan, I found it to be an interesting experience to read over the transcript from this evening. I remembered the evening well, but not much of what I had said. This is not unusual for me. When I make an effort to invite a reflective space and see what emerges from a group, I often recall little of the specifics. It seems the power of the immediate takes over and my memory is one of the first casualties.

As the evening started, I was mindful of being a "newcomer" to the conference. Having just returned from a week-long workshop (with educators, business people, and others engaged in building a different kind of community for young people in Corvallis, Oregon), it was not possible for me to head off to yet another week-long program. This, in part, is what probably drew me to start off as I did, with the meditation and a few comments, then opening the floor to see whatever people wanted to say. It was a way to help me connect to what was moving in the group. But, as often happens, practical details played a strong role in how things actually developed ("for want of a nail..."). Most people could not hear one another when they spoke without mikes. I had wanted to work in this manner because it has been my experience that passing microphones, or having people queue up at standing microphones, often undermines the spontaneity of a conversation. It also introduces an element of artificial mediation — people hear amplified rather than natural voices. Anyhow, this

quickly proved an exercise (should I say practice) in frustration. I began repeating what people had said, paraphrasing as necessary, but then some folks were unhappy not hearing people's actual words.

What developed was an interesting struggle. Having seen many times how brief and spontaneous comments from a large group can begin to reveal a tapestry of awareness, I wanted to stick with not using the mikes, while an increasingly vocal number of the participants wanted the mikes. It felt to me that they also wanted me to not control the process. My efforts to connect with where the group was at were paying off, albeit producing some unexpected outcomes. The group, or at least many of the people in it, were upset—with me, no less. We were seeing where we were at, at that very moment, and it was not especially comforting.

As this power struggle developed over the next few minutes, I could see myself also getting hooked into it. The little voice in my mind was saying, "After years of experience, I do know something about how to foster a dialogic space." "Microphones produce speeches," it added. Of course, as soon as I even started to dig in my mental heels, things got worse. I was probably lucky that one of my increasingly vocal "opponents" didn't come up and try to forcibly remove me from the premises.

When my little inner struggle over the evil of microphones passed, what unfolded was a beautiful and, at least for me, a quite powerful flow of conversation. This, of course, you can judge for yourself.

As I read over the entire conversation now, I am touched by the evening anew. I have often found that the intention to allow for a more authentic dialogue often results in discomfort, disappointment, a feeling of expectations not being met. So, while uncomfortable in the moment, I also recognized the territory and knew deep down that it was all right. I wish I could better explain this paradoxical combination of discomfort and comfort. But the best I can do is say that it is an old friend, an ally I have come to respect.

This leads to a natural question. How can we discern post-hoc rationalization from genuine being in the moment, where something new, and surprising, emerges. I know of only one way. Wait and see. Wait and see what arises over time. Wait and see if those involved are more able to bring forth genuinely new conditions in their lives, in their organizations, and ultimately in our world— conditions more in line with our genuine aspirations. While this is difficult to assess for a group that gathers from so many different places and then disperses, it is still the only standard that matters, for me. Comfort in the moment is a poor measure for deep development. What we create in our lives matters far more. So, for all of us who were at the 2001 Shambhala Institute program, what are we creating now in our lives? And how have our experiences together in Nova Scotia mattered in our creating? For those of you reading this for the first time, hopefully the question holds no less meaning.

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