

“I’m Not a Social Activist; I’m Just a Teacher”

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Abstract: *The story of one person's transformation in her frames of reference about race and white hegemony brings to life the process of epochal and incremental transformation.*

Key Words: transformative learning, white hegemony, incremental and epochal transformation

The purpose of this paper is to bring to life a conceptualization from transformation theory — epochal and incremental change. We narrate Victoria's story of transformative learning as she shifted her consciousness from deep embeddedness in white hegemony to growing awareness of race, racism, and what it means to be white in today's U.S. culture.

Our premise is that a change in European American consciousness about the meaning of whiteness is an example of perspective transformation (European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness, 2002); thus, an analysis of this change may contribute to understanding the dynamics of transformative learning. According to founding theorist Jack Mezirow (2000) the process of transformative learning includes coming to recognize the distortions and limitations in one's current worldview and adopting a belief system with changed frames of reference. Transformation may manifest during periods of discomfort or disorientation when an individual becomes aware of dissonance between espoused and practiced values or when familiar coping strategies cease to be effective. As a result of disorienting dilemmas, previously held views are often discarded and new perspectives emerge. Mezirow suggests that “Transformations in habit of mind may be *epochal*, a sudden, dramatic, reorienting insight, or *incremental*, involving a progressive series of transformations in related points of view that culminate in a transformation in habit of mind” (2000, p. 21). In this paper, through examination of one case narrative, we offer insight about the nature of epochal and incremental transformations.

Methodology

We are six European Americans who, as individuals, play a variety of institutional and community roles as adult educators. As a research team, we have spent several years studying the impact of white hegemony on our own and others' lives. Our current study is a heuristic investigation of our personal experiences. We concur with Clark Moustakas (1990) who has observed, “Heuristic inquiry offers possibilities for understanding transitions in the development of identity, personality, character, and selfhood...useful in resolution of dysfunctional behavior and in corrections of distorted perceptions...” (p. 102).

We began this project with an exercise that helped each member reflect upon and visually represent his or her personal journey in understanding what it means to be white. We used the resulting collages as catalysts for extensive interviews, spending several hours with each individual's story and pausing as a group to explore emerging insights about both the individual storyteller and our group's research topic. We coded transcripts independently and then met as a team for several rounds of reflection to verify and refine our thematic inferences.

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Victoria's Story

For this paper we chose Victoria's story of changing meaning perspective because it offers a vivid example of epochal transformation, in combination with incremental. Victoria is an adult educator whose frames of reference were limited by what we have described elsewhere as a “system of thought...characterized by...a stubbornly intransigent hegemony” (European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness, 2003a, p. 127). She re-created her life at age 54, moving from New England to California in order to help create a new graduate program for adults. In the collage that Victoria created for our interview process, the focal point is a large volcano in full eruption. We use Victoria's metaphor to organize our narrative.

Before the Eruption

Aside from one boy in kindergarten, Victoria does not remember any people of color in her midwestern hometown. She also tells us that she doesn't remember the civil rights movement. Observing that “during the '60s I was oblivious,” she explains “I was in this really dramatic mess of a marriage...completely absorbed by all the turmoil that was my life.”

Moving forward to the 1980s, Victoria recalls an incident at a northeastern college where she taught. After students wrote first drafts of their term papers, she scheduled individual telephone conferences to discuss potential improvements. Remembering with discomfort her interaction with an African-American man, she tells us, “I remember this poor man trying to engage me and both of us getting increasingly frustrated at the impasse. He tried for about ten minutes, and then he just... acquiesced to whatever I was telling him to do.... I can see *now* that what he was saying was that this [class in learning theory] was *totally* Eurocentric, and I had no consciousness that one can't generalize to all people from white people.... I was just insufferable. I laid out the inadequacies of his paper and told him that he didn't understand. I remember thinking ‘How did he get in this program? He can't understand the simplest thing.’ He must have just given up, and thought, ‘Oh, this is so hopeless, this is not worth my time.’” Victoria pauses, squirming in her chair to illustrate her feelings, “It just makes me squirm to think of what I did.”

Volcanic Change

Pointing to the volcano that punctuates her life's journey toward greater awareness of racism and white hegemony, Victoria shifts her narrative to her move to California and a new job. One of the eruption's early rumbles happened the first week when an African American man expressed strong anger about something that happened in the group of new students. “His burst of anger shocked me. There I was — a good white woman from lower middle class, midwestern roots, 54 years old. And if there's one thing I learned growing up, it's that you don't lose your temper in public. Better you don't lose your temper at all, but certainly not in public!”

She explains that this first group included one African American man, eight white students, and two white teachers. During its initial August residency, the group decided to petition the administration to re-open enrollment so that members could recruit a more diverse student body. By September, the cohort was transformed. In addition to the eight European-American students, there were now nine students of color — six African Americans, a Chinese American, a Latino and Latina. (Multicultural Inquiry eXchange, 1996).

Victoria candidly admits her judgmental reactions during the September weekend. Sighing with embarrassment, “I'm going to tell you something I have *never* said out loud.” She

again squirms to show discomfort, then pauses, “It makes me feel ashamed....” Gulping a deep breath, she plunges on, “I remember being completely bowled over by the way the people of color were sort of taking over and thinking to myself, ‘That’s really nervy of them. Who do they think they are?’” She then asks rhetorically, “Would I have had those thoughts if the newcomers were white?” She pauses, before answering her own question. “Maybe...but I remember that I was very consciously noticing the fact that they were of color.”

Victoria describes another event that contributed to her sense of sitting on a volcano. She remembers an afternoon when the white participants sat silent and bewildered during a group reflection as students of color seemed to erupt — some in anger, others in tears. “I was trying to listen, really pay attention — couldn’t quite follow what everybody was talking about.... And then [an African American] interpreted the last hour to us white people.” Victoria explains that one African-American criticizing another for coming back late from lunch had precipitated the volatility during the reflection session. A veiled conversation ensued, in which the real issue was violating the norm of solidarity among people of color when in the presence of white people. “It was so amazing to me — to learn that there was this whole other reality in the room. I had been sitting through the whole thing, but without understanding any of it. I hadn’t had a clue.”

As the months unfolded, Victoria struggled with ongoing puzzlement, gradually assisted by students of color who she feels adopted her. “Somehow, some of the students of color decided I was educable. They developed a fondness for me; they developed some kind of a trust in me. And coached me.... For me, knowing comes in the context of relationship. As I get closer to people, I am able to get more of an understanding of what it might be like to be them.”

The cohort attended a workshop on race relations. Victoria remembers, “A woman of color talked about how awful it was each day to send her son out because there was nothing she could do to protect him from what he would face. And *that* I could connect to. I got this sudden big *a-ha* about what that would be like because I have children and that’s something I could imagine.... I thought, ‘That is just awful — her son is not safe and there is nothing she can do.’”

In May, Victoria stumbled into another *a-ha*. She impatiently snapped at a Latina student to “give it a rest” because she was weary of the student’s ongoing commentary on racism. Victoria reports that she still feels the impact of the student’s response — that her life as a woman of color didn’t allow the privilege of “giving it a rest.” (See “Victoria’s Story” in this volume, *European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness*, 2003b).

Victoria concludes, “So, there were a lot of things that happened during that year that just kept grabbing at my attention in such dramatic ways.” Referring to the entire year and pointing again to the volcano, Victoria says, “I think once you have that kind of an explosion, you can’t go backwards from it. I don’t see how you can go back and be oblivious. You could harden your heart, but couldn’t go back to the total lack of awareness, like the way I was when I came.”

Surveying the New Landscape: “Everything I Thought I Knew Just Didn’t Apply”

Robin presses Victoria to try to discern why the students of color decided to trust her. “You gave the example of the African American from your earlier teaching experience, who you said tried to talk to you...and gave up. And the people of color in the cohort could have given up. They had a lot of other options.... Yet, they made a decision to trust you.” Victoria nods, “They did, didn’t they? It wouldn’t surprise me to learn that they got together and caucused about it, and decided, ‘This person is worth our effort, we can do something with her, she’s teachable.’”

Victoria joins Robin's question, "Why the trust? Why did I seem so openhearted and teachable, and yet was such an ass a few years earlier?" Speculating about possible answers, Victoria describes the impact of relocating to a new city and new job. "I do have this sense that I was starting a whole new life, entirely unlike what I had ever known. Nothing was the same." She further observes, "It might also have something to do with the conditions. In this other instance [with the African-American man who acquiesced to her demands], we were in a one-on-one conversation, a very traditional sort of academic structure where he writes a paper, I read the paper and tell him how to fix it... So what's going to nudge me out of thinking I know how things are supposed to be?" Comparing that experience to what she faced after relocating, she muses, "The new job was entirely different. I couldn't figure out what was going on. None of the other faculty seemed to understand...I was in this huge place of not knowing... I had no confidence that I knew what I was doing... Everything I thought I knew just didn't apply."

After the Eruption: Moving On, Taking Action

We have explored the epochal learning that occurred for Victoria during her first year in a new job. In the decade that followed, her trajectory of changing consciousness has been more incremental, as she struggles to advocate for making changes in her institution. "I remember going to faculty meetings and feeling so alone, so totally isolated and alone, because there wasn't one other person on the [program] faculty who knew what I was talking about. I kept trying to explain that this thing about race was *really* important! I remember [our director] telling me, 'We just use whatever *ism* is around as a way of examining assumptions. Racism, classism, sexism — they're interchangeable.'" Bemused, Victoria rolls her eyes and nods, "I said, 'I don't think so!'"

"I knew that I had an important message and I guess I felt it was a moral obligation. I have a real streak in me of believing that if you're right and if it's clear that you're right, then the power of being right should simply prevail. One of the hardest things that I've had to learn is that being able to prove logically that something is right doesn't necessarily convince people. Throughout my whole life, if people weren't coming around to my way of thinking, I would just try to explain it again. Because I'd think, 'Surely, the problem is they didn't understand. If I can just find the right words, get the logic right, then of course people will be persuaded.' It's been hard for me to learn that there's an emotional logic that has nothing to do with the kind of logic that I'm good at, and that I have to learn how to speak that logic."

Victoria speaks about her third year of teaching, this time with a different cohort. "I got to do the synergy project, and that was life-changing." In the synergy project, which used an experiential method for working across differences (Barlas, 1997; Tang, 1997), the cohort divided into two teams, one white and one black. Victoria describes a moment at the end of an afternoon when the two race-based groups had been working separately. "I'll never, *ever* forget walking back into that room, and somebody from our [white] team said to the black team, 'We missed you.' And [an African American man] said, 'We didn't miss you!' [laughter]" Victoria grows pensive, "I remember that so vividly, 'We didn't miss you!' In that moment, I understood how much they were getting out of being together. I realized that this was such a vital thing for them, and that there were things that I couldn't be part of [as their white teacher]. One of the most useful things for me to think about doing would be to figure out how to foster making things like that happen that I wouldn't be part of. I guess maybe I started then thinking on a bigger forum about what the issues were — thinking more systemically..."

Acting on her desire to be more “useful,” in the years that followed Victoria invested time and effort in several diversity initiatives in her school. Nevertheless, when one of the interviewers refers to her as a social activist, she disagrees. Robin counters, “You didn't just sit there with a changed consciousness.... You took it on to become a leader around acting on that consciousness in the institution. Which meant being lonely, taking risks. “No,” Victoria replies, “I don't perceive myself as an activist, not then and not now.... For me? I keep pursuing the issue because I think that if I can just find the right words, people will understand.... I think of myself as a one-on-one mentor, a one-on-one helper. I feel I make my best contribution helping people one at a time.” Robin presses further, “What about the term ‘social justice practitioner,’ which is a term you were talking about with me?”

“No,” answers Victoria, “it doesn't feel like me. I just think of myself as a teacher.”

Findings

In the heuristic study from which Victoria's case is taken, we identify themes that, although derived from the specific case of transformation related to white hegemony, have general relevance to transformation theory. From the common themes, those most salient in Victoria's story are: 1) being in relationship with people of color, 2) impact of dislocation on openness to new perspectives, 3) challenge in overcoming pervasive silence or denial in response to racial discomfort, and 4) awareness of a system of thought that supports oppressive behavior.

Victoria precipitated epochal learning when she uprooted herself to take on a teaching situation in which she felt lost. “Everything I thought I knew just didn't apply,” she says. Her world lost its foundation, so there was a big opening for new information to catch her attention and for her to think differently. Rooted in her developing relationships with students of color, she increasingly sees the impact of white hegemony through their eyes and thus feels an obligation to advocate for systems changes that will improve their experiences. She finds herself doing things she had not done before — discovering the different realities lived by people of color, speaking out among her peers about race and racism, becoming aware of the importance of “emotional logic.” In an ongoing interplay between new actions and the new insights they generate, Victoria's worldview continues changing incrementally. Although she tenaciously insists she is just a teacher and not a social activist, she is reframing what being a teacher means. Her path has taken her some distance from the person who was so “insufferable” with the African American student whose paper she perceived as evidence that he couldn't “understand the simplest thing.”

Implications for Transformative Learning Theory and Practice

To apply the insights we derive from Victoria's case, we recommend that adult educators strive to create situations that simulate epochal change and that foster the value of *not knowing*.

Creating Situations that Simulate Epochal Change

We recommend that educators construct learning environments for themselves and others that radically depart from current norms. Bring together people from different walks of life whose values and beliefs conflict. Painstakingly attend to each person's unique value in order to create an environment where all concerned can feel safe enough to embrace discomfort and learn from it. Create whole-person learning processes that invite emotions, explore the unconscious, validate intuition, and nurture relationships with empathic connection. These tasks demand new

visions for educating educators, who will not only need to acquire new skills, but also to break free from long-held academic norms about what is “appropriate” in learning environments.

Fostering the Value of Not Knowing

It is perhaps human nature to seek comfort in believing that we understand our lives and environments. To help themselves and others stay in an attitude of ongoing inquiry is a challenge for educators. A strategy that we find helpful is the formation of support groups. In the context of our own group's inquiry, each of us seeks to stay consciously aware that our inquiry supports an ongoing developmental process. As a group, we are vigilant when any of us falls into a frame of reference that presumes the person has *become* transformed, or that it is possible for white people to reach a perspective free from the distortions of hegemony. We nurture a norm of staying in an inquiry mode. We suggest that educators who want to develop practice that departs radically from any normative value form support groups to help themselves dwell in not knowing.

Note

1. The European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness fosters research and learning about White Supremacist Consciousness. Collective authorship under one name reflects our understanding of the way in knowledge is constructed. Members came together originally through a cultural consciousness project at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco; members are Carole Barlas, Elizabeth Kasl, Alec MacLeod, Doug Paxton, Penny Rosenwasser and Linda Sartor. Inquiries are welcome via email: collaborative@eccw.org

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