Transformation: The Key for Reducing the Risk and Impact of “Natural” Disasters and Climate Change

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Around the world, extreme natural events and disasters are occurring with increasing frequency and severity, and with increasingly devastating impacts. But how natural are these so-called ‘natural’ disasters? Humans and nature are intimately and interdependently intertwined. They interact reciprocally over time. Fundamentally, nature facilitates human life. However, if people disregard this vital relationship and live in disharmony with nature, nature can also challenge human survival. Failing to recognize this dialectical interaction has resulted in most humans living separated from nature and in disharmonious relationships with nature, themselves and others (Buergelt et al., 2017; Griffith, 2015). These increasingly disharmonious relationships are contributing to more extreme natural events occurring (Buergelt et al., 2017; Sithole et al., 2017). Parallel, our individual and collective capacities to respond to the demands of extreme natural events are declining, resulting in extreme natural events turning into disasters (Paton, Buergelt & Campbell, 2015). To stem this tide, humanity needs to urgently (re)establish harmonious relationships with nature and each other.

(Re)learning to live in balance is a valuable and cost-effective pathway for reducing the risk of disasters. Living in harmony with nature and each other contributes to preventing extreme natural events occurring, to reducing the risk of extreme natural events turning into disasters, and to developing the required individual and collective adaptive capabilities (Buergelt at al., 2017; Paton & Buergelt, 2017). Findings from our quantitative and qualitative interdisciplinary research spanning over a decade provide tangible examples from Indigenous peoples in Australia, Taiwan and Japan of how beliefs that endorse living in harmony with nature and each other result in people individually and collectively developing adaptive capacities as well as creating cultures and societies that embed practices in people’s everyday living that binds people and nature, and people, together (Buergelt et al., 2017; Paton & Buergelt; 2017). However, knowledge of the benefits that can accrue from living in harmony with nature and each other, and of other cultures living in harmony with nature and benefiting from it, are unlikely to be sufficient to motivate Western cultures to adopt them (Berkes, Colding, & Folke, 2003). The prevailing fundamental beliefs people in Western cultures currently hold about the origin of the universe (cosmology), the nature of the world (ontology) and the nature of knowledge (epistemology) significantly impede (re)establishing harmonious relationships between people and nature, and among people.

People in Western countries hold to large degrees totalitarian, positivistic and rational beliefs. This combination of worldviews has contributed to people perceiving their relationship with the environment largely in anthropocentric terms (Paton, Buergelt & Campbell, 2015; Griffith, 2014, 2015). In essence, believing that humans and nature are separate led to Western cultures typically seeing nature as a resource that can justifiably be exploited to benefit people and trying to control natural processes (Berkes, Colding, & Folke, 2003). As a result, Western
cultures act in ways that capitalize on the resources and amenities sourced from nature. This separation also led to Western societies managing the risk of extreme natural events and disasters by focusing on attempting to control natural processes, which has proven largely ineffective (Buergelt et al., 2017). Importantly, this separation reduced people’s understanding of how the quality of their relationship with their natural environment can amplify or ameliorate the risk of extreme natural events occurring and turning into disasters (Paton & McClure, 2013).

In contrast, Indigenous people striving to live in harmony with nature and each other has its roots in their metaphysical cosmology and their nature-based, unified and equitable and epistemic ontology and epistemology that lead to eco-centric beliefs (Buergelt et al., 2017; Griffith, 2014, 2015; Paton & Buergelt, 2017). On the example of Australian Indigenous people, we will discuss how the fundamental beliefs of Australian Indigenous people lead to them looking after the land and designing highly sophisticated cultures and societies that protect nature by ensuring that people live in harmony with nature (Griffith, 2014, 2015; Lawler, 1999). We suggest that motivating Western cultures to adapt living in harmony will require a paradigm shift from totalitarian, positivistic, rational and anthropocentric beliefs to metaphysical, nature-based, unified, equitable and eco-centric beliefs. We argue that transformative processes are the key to accomplish the paradigm shift fast and on a large scale (Buergelt et al., 2017). Consequently, it is paramount to identify and facilitate pathways that have the potential to effectively transform worldviews, that have immediate everyday benefits for people, and that are easily embedded into everyday cultural and social practices.

We will discuss the ways in which transformative learning and education (Mezirow, 1991; 2003), people growing up in nature and interacting with nature (e.g., Faber Taylor & Kuo, 2006; Griffith, 2014, 2015; Thompson, Aspinall, & Montazino, 2008) and interacting with Indigenous people (Buergelt et al., 2017) are key transformative pathways. Lastly, we put forth that art, partner dance and ancient holistic healing systems and practices also hold a great promise for contributing to this paradigm shift.

Transformative processes are not only the access to accomplishing the paradigm shift required to effectively reduce the risk of disasters and climate change but also to addressing other ‘wicked’ problems humanity is facing such as social disorder, food and water insecurities, diseases and poverty. Thus, our ability to engage people from Western countries in these transformative pathways may hold the key to human survival.

References


