

# Oxfordshire exploratory conversations for Inner Resilience Network: Phase 1 report.

Jo Hamilton, December 2019.

The conversations explored the connections between the inner and outer dimensions of social change work, and the idea of an 'Inner Resilience Network' in Oxfordshire and beyond.

This is a summary of the conversations and some emergent threads from Oxfordshire. Concurrent conversations have taken place in South Devon, Scotland and at UK level<sup>1</sup>, and activities are emerging in response to needs in these localities.

## Who

Jo had conversations with 21 people in Oxfordshire, who are described on the back page. More conversations are planned, particularly with organisations and communities not well represented within this first round.

## Language and framing 'Inner Resilience', and doorways to inner work

There are many doorways to inner work, many languages to describe the inner dimensions of change, and acknowledging that the inner dimensions of change are not separate from the outer dimensions. There was a general resistance to the term 'resilience' as it has been overused in corporate and health sectors, and implies the necessity of 'bouncing back' or being a 'resilient cog in a corporate machine'.

For those in grassroots organisations and NGOs, the main ways the 'inner' shows up is through *what happens in its absence*: conflict in groups, people feeling isolated with the feelings connected to social change, overwork and a shadow of burnout.

Others felt the constant work pressure was offset by the strong culture of camaraderie and support, with people united by a social purpose.

For some organisations who deliver practical low carbon projects, there was a feeling that their work was situated between two polarised stories of our time (see the quote on the right), with organisational defences against exploring the negative stories. Some people identified a need

### **Birdwings Rumi**

**Translated by Coleman Barks.**

Your grief for what you've lost lifts a mirror  
up to where you're bravely working.  
Expecting the worst, you look, and instead,  
here's the joyful face you've been wanting to see.  
Your hand opens and closes and opens and closes.  
If it were always a fist or always stretched open,  
you would be paralyzed.  
Your deepest presence  
is in every small contracting and expanding,  
the two as beautifully balanced and coordinated  
as birdwings.

*"there's such a divide, there's no middle ground at the moment. There's the extreme positive end... 'electric vehicles are going to save us all and we're going to grow this low carbon economy', and there is the other end which is the 'we're fucked'. There needs to be a joining of those two halves, there needs to be a positivity and a negativity, you need to express all of those things."*

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<sup>1</sup> The team in this instance are Jo Hamilton, Eva Schonveld and Claire Milne, who have been exploring the idea together for a couple of years, and have received funding to develop an evidence base, pilot projects in three areas, alongside a more national and international organisational focus. We're doing the local elements first.

for support to occupy the middle ground, to keep both stories in relation with each other, and for support to feel the painful, overwhelming and uncertain aspects of these times and the future. Some interviewees reflected that they personally lost touch with the inner side through losing touch with bodies and embodied knowing, and connection to the more than human world.

There was also a recognition that many people either do not have the language or experience of inner work to see its relevance, or have different languages for the diversity of inner work which varies according to contexts, cultures and needs. The following doorways to inner work were mentioned:

#### Doorways to inner work

- **Conflict and conflict resolution:** offering ways to help avert conflict in groups, and work with conflict when it arises.
- **Burnout:** Offering skills and resources to help prevent burnout, both individually and for groups.
- **Effective working:** Which practices sustain individuals and organisations to carry out their work?
- **Practical and positive projects:** If an organisation is focused on delivery of practical projects, how could inner work help them achieve this, and be with different stories of change?
- **Restorative justice and restorative organisations:** applying experience and learning from restorative justice in wider organisations to creating the conditions for collaborative working.
- **Healing:** and working across difference within and between outer and inner- focused movements. Inner skills could help heal rifts between movements and organizations who could be effective allies.
- **Connection with nature and the more than human world:** can enable a connection to more embodied experiences of the world, and help resource
- **Facilitation, Motivating and sustaining groups:** Facilitation and group training is not framed by inner work, but is a vehicle for introducing inner practices in the context of social change
- **Reflective learning for change:** Reflective learning (e.g. Action Learning Sets) within or between organisations was identified as an important opportunity to evaluate situations and change processes.

## 2. Barriers/ tensions and opportunities for inner work

**As mentioned above, there are some defences against the inner dimensions of change.** These include othering the inner through language, culture and judgement (e.g. ‘touchy feely stuff’), and not devoting time to reflection because of time scarcity, urgency and the bias to action, alongside the lack of skills and support to do inner work at the depth required. **However, some defences are there for good reason, and not everyone feels comfortable exploring their feelings, particularly in group situations.**

#### Some barriers or tensions

- Fear of judgement - mental health, hippy, ‘touchy-feely’
- Because of time pressure, many groups generally don’t want to do the work proactively, they ask for help when in crisis or conflict.
- Lack of accessible resources to enable a safe exploration of the inner in organisations.

*“I think there is a point where just opening this stuff up, and not having a place for it to go, can do more harm than good in some spaces. ... there is a reality that we’re just not resourced and equipped to do this [bigger] stuff, ... without doing a significant amount less of that ‘outer’ stuff, and that can feel unacceptable because of pressure, now emergency...that’s the double bind that we’re in”.*

- How is inner work language in accessible ways?
- Small organisations have not developed strong culture of inner work because not funded to do so, and primarily voluntary time.
- Lack of familiarity with working with the felt sense of the body, or connection to nature

## Opportunities

- How we can be resourced by inner work practices, and how can that sustain us to carry out our intentions?
- Importance of normalising conversations about burnout and self-care, and not seeing them as an indulgence.
- Embedding inner resilience practices in organisations takes time. For larger organisation there's an opportunity to model the need for HR department to take emotional resilience seriously, and offer a depth of mentoring and support. Organisations could also offer a series of small steps/ workshops over time, to people with differing degrees of familiarity with inner work.
- The recent civil society changes have created an 'enabling background': the school strikes, Greta, XR, and with it the need to support a younger generation of activists
- Expanding communities of practice who attend to the inner and outer side of change.
- Culturally, using the current political situation to underline the importance of communicating across difference within local politics, and having the tools to do that.
- Connecting existing areas of support and resources – e.g. Climate Psychology Alliance, Mindfulness and Social Change Network, trainers and facilitators.

*"some people are closer to the opening up, some are further away, how do we get people onto the journey where they might value a workshop? ...for some people it might only be a few steps"*

## 3. Resourcing and networking

Whilst the conversations started out with the idea of a network, it was clear that many people belong to different networks already, and networks need nurturing, and different opportunities to be involved. Networking and alliance building could happen organically through building a community of practice for those working on inner and outer transformative social change.

Common desires for resources are summarised below, some of which could be offered at an Oxfordshire level, some of which are more suited to national / international levels of scale:

- **Visibility:** making people, organisations and practices working on transformative change more visible. Accessible short form background and tools around inner work. [Jo is currently working on this]
- **Learning from other organisations:**  
e.g. examples and case studies of good practice, how inner is framed in different ways across the world, opportunities to explore what's going on individually and collectively.
  - Evidence base showing effectiveness and necessity of inner work.
- **Online and face to face events:**

*"building up that reserve of materials and case studies and evidence that suggests that we're not just programmed to be robotic machines"*

- Bringing people and organisations together to develop relationships, share practices and enable collaboration
- Online platform / calendar to enable easier advertising of events
- Dialogue / meet ups where different personal practices can be shared.
- Events which catered for different people, at different times, in different ways, and to enable those with neural diversity to thrive.
- Events which incorporated the importance of ceremonies
- Events and networking to bring diverse movements together, and encourage learning and action about diversity and inclusion
- Working with healthy feminine and healthy masculine
- Building support networks around climate change – reflective groups, work that reconnects

*"a place to be with the burdens, pains and paradoxes of these times. A place of nourishment, connection and transformation. A place to realise that individuals and organisations are not facing these many challenges alone."*

- **Resourcing:**

- **Funding to** build local and national alliances that last and learn.
- Subsidised therapies for those working on social change issues

## 4. Emergent threads

Some common threads emerged across the three geographical inquiry areas, which clustered around themes of Collaborative culture, diversity and trauma.

### Collaborative culture

The cultures in organisations that we are part of or interact offer opportunities to work together with health and openness, or reinforce more isolating and unsupportive ways of working.

Common themes included the importance of holding a systemic view of change and resilience, acknowledging the wider systems we are part of and that have influenced us, and exploring how different collaborative practices can be brought into organisations and workplaces. Particular examples of this included reflections on the difficulty of *reaching across difference* in local government. There was also a recognition that all organisations (grassroots, professional, local government, NGO) have a bias to action, and value delivering tasks over the time resource taken for inner resourcing, so inner work needs to be framed, and workshops delivered, in different, accessible and tailored ways.

Emerging needs:

- **Local level:** groups, events and workshops suitable for different cultures of change-makers. This being advertised in a central place. Fostering communities of practice to develop and share learning and experience on the inner and outer dimensions of change (e.g. Action Learning Sets).
- **National level:** organisations to pilot mentoring schemes within or between organisations, networking between organisations who could help unlock support at the

local level (e.g. [Climate Psychology Alliance](#)). Acknowledging the influence that NGO and activist culture have on each other, enabling ways for learning across the cultures.

### Diversity, equity and Inclusion

Organisations within Oxfordshire had different approaches to working on diversity, equity, inclusion and justice, which incorporated different degrees of inner work. For example, Creators of Peace UK links to an international network working on dismantling colonialism; those working with Re-evaluation co-counselling link climate with other systemic oppressions; Reclaim the Power work at local and national level to link climate change and the hostile environment for immigration; trainers collective Navigate have experience delivering workshops on power and privilege, also experience of reflective approaches to exploring racialised oppressions.

Emerging needs:

- **Local level:** Pooling resources and trainings about diversity and inclusion which include inner practices.
- **National level:** Signposting to existing web links and resources on the inner dimensions of equality, diversity and inclusion training.

### Trauma

The impact of historical and individual trauma is beginning to be understood more widely, in all the different ways it shows up. In the Oxfordshire conversations, trauma emerged through acknowledging that *not* addressing trauma (e.g. and how it manifests in separation and division across races and classes) 'gets in the way of collaborative working together'.

**Emerging needs:**

- **Local level:** workshops to learn about and develop a wider conversation on the impact and role of trauma in the social change issues. Reflecting on and learning between how different approaches address trauma: psychotherapeutically, through embodied practices, and shamanic approaches.
- **National level:** resources and organisational support systems to enable collaboration between those with experience around working with trauma, with those who are holding workshops and who may not have that experience. Drawing on a recent day workshop in Totnes, idea emerged of workshops and resources for 'Trauma-informed practitioners'.

## 6. Possible next steps

The conversations had so far demonstrate a real need and hunger for inner resources to help a wider range of people be with the difficulties of these times, and help work towards healthier and more collaborative ways of being and working.

From the conversations conducted so far, there are some threads which are common and worth pursuing, and there seems to be energy and interest in developing a collaborative approach which can meet some of these themes:

- **Developing a community of practice / communities of practices** for those working on inner and outer social change

- **Dedicated website and online platform** to enable visibility, learning, sharing resources, advertising events, linking to practitioners, sharing case studies, hosting resources.
- **Series of events:** e.g. Action Learning sets, funding for facilitation for Work that Reconnects, venue and bursary to enable wider participation
- **Transformation conversations events:** public events with invited speakers, giving the opportunity to learn across a variety of practices about the role of inner in outer transformative social change.
- **Case studies:** curating, searching and writing (national and local) to highlight group and organisational practices which combine inner and outer change.
- **Evidence base:** Linking to accessible descriptions of different types of inner work, building up that reserve of materials and case studies and evidence concerning what doing inner work can support [Jo is working on this, some of it coming out of PhD research].
- **Getting some funding** to support the changes we'd like to see.

These are all possible... but to co-create the next steps it would be valuable to hear your thoughts, responses and reflections, and we'd need some resources of time and funding.

***Some possible calling questions are:***

- What practices can support healthy, collaborative cultures of transformative social change?
- What is needed in Oxfordshire to broaden and deepen our collective offerings to support transformative social change?
- How do we share experiences across different modalities / approaches?
- What collaboration/s would interest you?

I'd love to know what questions energise you in this area.

I have a little funding (and a lot more time resource from April onwards) to support whatever wants to emerge, and would love to explore the conversations and ideas in a more collaborative way. Personally, I'm exploring arranging an ongoing series of workshops based on 'The Work That Reconnects'.

## 7. Background information

These included those involved in grassroots and community organisations working at purely local, or local to international scales (e.g. Reclaim the Power, Thames Headwaters Bioregion Forum, Oxford City Farm, Community Action Groups Oxfordshire, Insightshare Participatory Video); a community energy company (Low Carbon Hub); Restorative Justice Practitioner; employees of local level projects in a national organisations (BioRegional, Creators of Peace UK); those working with spiritual communities (Quakers); facilitators and resilience and systemic facilitators; practitioners and workshop leaders (psychotherapists, eco therapists, shamanic practitioners, Mindfulness, Re-evaluation Co-counselling); Oxford City Councillors past and present.

### **The initial email:**

Inner Resilience Network of networks (IRNon) is a newly forming socio-ecological change initiative, focused on the intersection between the inner and outer dimensions of change. Our focus is on the crucial role our inner, emotional, spiritual worlds play in shaping our relationships with, actions in, and capacity to transform the outer world.

### **The Inner Resilience Network of Networks (IRNon) at the Oxfordshire scale**

Oxfordshire has a wealth of environmental and social justice expertise, experience and action. This includes campaigners, creatives, academics, writers, advocates working at different levels of scale, from local community right through to national and international levels. Oxfordshire also has a wealth of experienced practitioners of the heart, soul and body – the inner dimensions of change. Those with insight and experience of our inner, not always visible, journeys. The resources that give us the energy and passion to continue, and to act with integrity and wisdom. Those who hold spaces for connection to nature, for therapy, for movement and dance and creativity, for mindfulness, for connection with our more than human selves, for dreaming, for visioning, for spiritual connection, for ritual, for helping people to bring their full gifts to the healing of our world. And yet ... the interdependence between the spectrum of communities is not always visible or appreciated.

In different ways and different degrees, we are all facing problems of how to respond to the multiple demands: the searing realities of austerity on systems of health, education and basic care; of divisions between communities of place, race and class; the uncertainties surrounding Brexit; the many challenges posed by climate change, and many more.

We can't be on every frontline, but could we work together in a more holistic way, which integrates inner and outer dimensions of change? And if so, what could we achieve together?