

Scotland 'Cups of Tea' report for Inner Resilience Network

2019. Written by Eva Schonveld.

Introduction

These informal conversations or 'Cups of Tea' which happened Scotland as part of the Inner Resilience Network of Networks (IRN) project¹ from March-October 2019, were part of an exploration to see whether those whose work happens somewhere in the intersection of inner experience and social change making, would find it beneficial to be better networked with one another (not only within their own way of doing things, which is often quite well networked, but across the diversity of approaches covering the range of what we refer to as the 'inner'), and if so, what might such a network look like and what might it do.

In the process of my Cups of Tea, and through team reflections within IRN there was an emergent sense of a [hidden movement](#): a multitude of people working on similar areas, albeit in very different ways, but still relatively lacking in the cohesion or shared strategic thinking that could spark the kind of shared momentum which could push what they do beyond its current boundaries and develop into a real wellspring for deep social change.

The marginalisation of the work of most of those I spoke to echoes the marginalisation of our inner experience in mainstream society, riven as it is by extrinsic values and unacknowledged power dynamics. Although it has been pruned, modified and prettied up over the centuries, our social structure still carries the inheritance of 'power by domination' deep within its DNA. As such our inner experience and the vulnerability and potential for true liberation that lies within it are a threat. One that has been fairly effectively dealt with through trivialisation, ridicule and shaming to date.

I cast a very wide net in my Cups of Tea in Scotland: I spoke to: a traditional arts administrator, a happiness and addictions specialist, a group and Work That Reconnects practitioner, an activism trainer, a poet, an academic focused on emotional experience of climate change, a black and ethnic minority environmental worker, mindfulness practitioners, an artist concerned with climate change, a community flood resilience officer, a writer and spiritual activist, an Non-Violent Communication practitioner, a Scottish Government employee and druid, the Catholic director of a Human Ecology programme, an academic working on wellbeing, a member of Dark Mountain, a social activist working with people with experience of extreme marginalisation, a life coach, a shaman and two radical herbalists.

Those I spoke to tended to want to talk about the deep changes that are needed at a social level and what we can do here in Scotland to facilitate those changes. There was a real confirmation that the intersection between inner experience and progressive social change is a fertile one and a strong welcome from everyone to the possibility of being better connected with

¹ Also happening concurrently in Totnes and Oxfordshire

others working in that area, across multiple modalities. People were also generally very keen to get together to discuss possible ways forward with one another, and a gathering to that end forms the basis for my next steps in Scotland.

The main threads emerging?

1. Conscious and collaborative culture/Deep Transformation

There was broad agreement across most of those I spoke to that our culture has developed through a history of oppression which has given rise to many of our social and environmental ills; a belief that one of the keys to meaningful change is via our personal and social culture; and a strong sense that recognition and foregrounding of the inner has a big part to play in that.

Connection with and sharing of our inner experience is the deep fulcrum of a potential game changing social shift. If, instead of serving the system of domination which drives the world's economies and trickles down into most of our lives through the need to keep our heads down and hide our true selves, we could begin from our deepest needs - for connection, love, meaningful work, self esteem - our world would look very different.

Living in this crazy society - where we've been affected by the domination system, control dominance, punishment/reward, we've basked in this stuff for centuries - millennia ... it's about recovering from this trauma and building resilience to meet a life that is still full of patriarchy, so that I can absorb the violence and respond to it from a place of nonviolence. The need for support is really big - most people have no idea or are ashamed to admit how much support they need and to be able to ask for it.

We focus too much on the problems: unemployment, drug addiction - but the root of the problem is wellbeing.

For me - many ills of the age come from a sense of meaninglessness and alienation. Working in the arts, gives people some kind of cultural anchor - a sense of tradition, identity and belonging. As we identify what we have as a community that distinguishes us from other communities and cultures - through traditional arts we also find the things that we have in common with other cultures.

2. Diversity

My sample has so far included more white and middle class people than other groups. I put some effort into contacting a wider range of people but it may be that my framing was not inviting in the right way or that people are very busy and not generally able to respond to slightly left field requests.

The importance of working across difference and of including the margins has been strongly highlighted by several of those I spoke to and I felt a strong need to do more digging and broaden out my sample before taking further steps, so that a really broad spectrum of people can feel ownership of this conversation from the beginning.

The issue of class was raised by several interviewees:

In my local parish there's 60 nationalities who attend mass - people are united in that participation across their differences - in that moment you're all the same/equal. There's less possibility for that really rich diversity if it's more individualistic - you're less likely to encounter diversity - you're more likely to encounter people who've been on a similar journey to yourself.

It's middle class to protest, to care about the environment. It's so important if we're going to do this work it's got to speak to people who're the poorest of the poor. When they come on board, they bring traction.

Specially in rural areas you're always going to come up against questions of local power, land ownership, deference. It's a stark reminder of how external social structures shape people's internal worldview. Living with a landowner over generations has an impact on how people view themselves, the world and what is possible.

People working on inner work are largely white middle class people. It can feel like there's a real lack of awareness - like it props up the dominant culture.

There are tensions and inspirations in the overlap space between inner and outer. It's hard sometimes to make the overlap... When the focus is radical politics and not everyone has the same openness to the inner side of things it can be seen as a bit fluffy, a bit hippy specially when there's a sense of urgency and a reality of under-resource. But conversely inner focused work can have a lack of political awareness and how everyone is white (though that's changing) I find a piece of each is missing in both worlds - attitudes and prejudices from both sides.

Much of our collective experience of the inner in the UK is either in terms of established religion and/or mental health services. But the agenda of mental health organisations in terms of social change is limited to changing the way that services are offered or to shifting attitudes to mental health issues, not to changing the conditions of society which give rise to many of the mental health issues we experience (or indeed challenging the wider perception of some of these states as *necessarily* being problematic).

Articulating the nature and depth of social change we mean is important because in general the discussion about our inner experience has been around control. If this conversation about this

inner is also about the need for radical social change it's important to frame our conversations clearly around that for them to be productive.

The driver which brought me into this work was climate change, but through these conversations I have understood that in order to truly connect and build common cause, it's necessary to put that to one side and listen deeply to what drives other people's passion or even desperation for change of this damaging system. I'm keen to create contexts for conversation that are nourished by the essential understandings and strengths brought by an inner perspective, to develop a truly shared agenda, equal collaboration and build momentum for the radical change we need.

3. Trauma

My understanding of the role of trauma has also developed hugely over the course of this project, though in general through conversations within our team rather than in the Cup of Tea interviews I had, where it wasn't generally a common frame of reference.

The tangled interconnections between attitudes towards personal trauma and the cultural inheritance of an inherently traumatising system of domination are key to both the causes and the solutions of our current global predicament. I have written more about this (at length I'm afraid) [here](#).

Our experience of trauma is both personal and collective. We experience trauma personally, but our culture, whether within our family, our community or the wider society, creates the container within which it can be addressed - or compounded. Traditional societies which haven't been colonised or assimilated into the dominant power-over paradigm, often have many cultural tools which help to resolve trauma at the collective level, allowing people to heal or even transform. Our current system has inherited a range of much less helpful attitudes from millenia of domination and many of the responses to trauma arising from that (shame, repression, internalisation, blaming, silence) only serve to compound it, This feeds a negative vortex of increasingly traumatised people, who are less and less resourced to withstand traumatising cultural imperatives.

The central role of trauma in conditioning our ability to respond from creativity, empathy and love is still a long way from being widely understood and accepted within colonised societies, and without a profound cultural shift is likely to remain so. It could be said that our cultural relationship to trauma is itself traumatised: as carefully as we protect and hide our personal traumas in the absence of safety, so we protect and hide our cultural acknowledgement of trauma. It doesn't feel safe to process it in this world which denies its very existence and which continues to promote the kinds of power-over behaviours that created the context for the trauma in the first place

Whatever the context, there is always also an inherent instinct towards health and Wholeness. Our culture has many streams in it and, marginalised as they are, those that are an expression

of our drive towards health have developed a wide range of fantastic tools which can support our healthy processing of trauma and our enlivening interactions with ourselves, one another and the wider world.

Languaging and framing the 'inner'

Developing thinking and practice around a widely accessible way of speaking about the field of 'inner' has become a core enquiry. Speaking to people from a range of backgrounds, it has become clear that there are rich shared vocabularies within different modalities which are crucial to their collective sense of meaning, but it has been much more difficult to find terms that speak to everyone about the range of experiences we have glossed as 'inner'.

From the beginning of this project we on the team have all struggled with the term 'the inner', which is so easily misread as speaking only to personal, individualised experience, when in fact the area we're looking at is richly interpersonal, social, cultural and includes other-than-human dimensions. To some extent this highlights the main reason this work is needed: there is little shared language for the range of experience covered by 'inner' and no easily accessible, shared term for this field because we tend not to talk about it, unless we are in specialised contexts with their own specialised language, which is often opaque or even off-putting to other groups. So for the time being, until we find a better word we will continue to continue to use this one.

One possibility might be to do some work on parallel languaging from different modalities - making connections between language that sounds very different, but may point to similar experience e.g. interconnectedness, God's love... [This](#) is an interesting article focusing on the issue of language between groups of different faiths (we think our job is even more difficult!).

Informality is really important here - the classic gardening thing, it's much easier to talk about that kind of thing while we're doing something. The language I use is always a reflection of how the person is talking to me. Finding language that expresses what is happening for me can be so empowering.

In general there's a difficulty with putting into words what this work is really about - what it's for. I always struggle to say what we actually do - what you're inviting people to take part in - it's often experiential and counter cultural.

I don't tend to talk about it - sometimes I'll share something of what I do: I go and sit quietly at the allotment - talk about breathing spaces, beauty ,nurturing the soul. But I'm always doing it as I'm teaching - getting new people to pause - then it's happening in action. There's always an inner aspect - starting meetings with a check-in or bringing a personal thing along.

I like the Franciscan quote: preach the gospel at all times - if necessary use words.

How does inner show up?

Our inner experience is a very potent and deep part of our identity and it's expression is one of the most vulnerable things we can do. Often people would much rather not risk sharing it in a space where it won't be well received.

In my Cups of Tea, many people have expressed a sense of frustration about our cultural reluctance to share more of our internal experience in our society, specially since the lack of this was often seen as one of the core reasons for our social and environmental problems.

The lack of that religious/spiritual community is vast - don't want to ally with established religion but can see how important that support and community is for people.

Where I'm really interested in is when someone from a working class background is introduced to the new age (e.g. via Iona) is not always entirely positive. There can be lots of narcissism - self reflective to the degree of not seeing the need for service, seeing that the flipside is of living in a society that hollows out any spiritual practice.

There should be an integrity to the inner work - I'm keen to find out how to make a claim to that integrity... I've seen too much of people scraping the top off spiritual insights and selling it for £1000 a day. I see spin offs from U Lab that give me the frights.

Barriers and opportunities to deliver on their purpose – regarding the inner side of change / the inner / outer intersection?

There were a wide range of very different kinds of barriers identified by the people I spoke to, from lack of funds to the tensions between those whose focus is more inner (and lack a political analysis) and those where it is more on outer change (and lack emotional awareness). I was most interested in what stands in the way of cultural change and on what might be done to shift these.

I'm so passionate about it but will have to commit to working evenings and weekends if I want it to get anywhere and that's not sustainable.

I do feel the frustration/injustice - as academics we can apply for £100,000s to research poverty, but if we just gave the money to the people instead of researching them, the problem would be solved! Where do you get the support/funding for things to actually happen?

Possible calling questions are arising from this?

Some of the questions that surfaced from the conversations include:

- How do we create a sense of a movement and create connections between people?
- Can we cohere practice groups or gatherings so that people can get to know and think together to catalyse new collaborations and blossoming?
- How can we serve the outer change that we need so urgently now?
- Question/s around mitigation: What do we need to face, what do we need to change and what do we need to learn as we look into the coming decades?
- Yearning for integrity around this stuff. I would respond positively to an invitation to explore the depths - of bringing a spiritual path to wherever it is
- It would be lovely to have an invite that said we're not expecting to solve all the problems - but that acknowledged the value of a really good, deep conversation.

Conclusion

It has been incredibly interesting, rewarding and satisfying to be in a position to approach such a thoughtful, skilled and generous group of people as I have during these interviews. I have definitely only scraped the very tip of the mountain of people, projects and work that's going on along these lines in Scotland.