Transformative Learning as the End of Learning

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Humans are considered to have an innate ability to learn individually and socially. To learn is associated with an adaptive process under which occurs a qualitative increase in knowledge. Both knowledge and learning are generally associated with a change that is positive. As such “transformative learning” may be understood as a process that brings about something that is especially innovative or especially positive, possibly both. In this article I investigate adaptive and transformative learning by relating them to process philosophy and ecological anthropology through examples in the resilience literature and popular culture. The narrative touches on the following three concepts: “Attractor”, “teleology” and “wisdom”.

If we consider adaptive learning (Walter and Holling 1990; Davidson-Hunt and Berkes 2003), as emergent from directional problem-solving, as inherent to the complex and entwined sets of dynamics that come about through the puzzle-solving that leads a person (or group) from somewhere, towards a dream, a vision, or an attractor. Then we encounter a paradox stated by Einstein: A problem cannot be solved with the same kind of thinking that produced it. A paradox because if the thinking is not the same, then how can the problem be? The moment the thinking changes, there is no longer a problem. So even if you use the same words, texts or actions– their meanings have changed and there is no going back, or zooming out to study the work that you have undertaken from a position “there”. Herein lies a mystery of teleology, since the puzzle-solving that solves the problem cannot be known from the beginning, or along the way, but only at the end. In that way all learning is perhaps transformative.

Yet, the words TRANSFORMATIVE + LEARNING seem to suggest an even greater shift that questions the learning at its core. A transformation that not only steers away from clichés and hi-ways, but also expands theory beyond what we call “learning” into other spheres, and beyond. It may be so that doing TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING means transcending double-binds. We may have to reflect on the nature of the charge that is always infused into learning as something positive and desirable. If, or as, we realize that what was to be learnt is not desirable. The attractor has faded. Then transformative learning has become the end of learning. We begin to de-learn, and re-learn. Is it possible that with transformative is meant a new thought?

In the book The Word for World is Forest (Le Guin 1976) newly conceived ideas are very rare. No matter if the idea is a “good” or “evil”, it is temporarily given divine status. Because its’ status is teleological. It extends beyond what is known and therefore not yet possible to define and attach values to. A new attractor has been born. For the moment it rests in thin air. It is based on faith and is approached with fear and the contours of wisdom.