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Humanitarian Work, Social Change, and Human Behavior

Compassion for Change

Cornelia C. Walther

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PREFACE

We live in a flowing balance of apparent opposites, which shape everything that exists. Individuals, communities, wider socio-economic spheres, and the planet are connected in a continuum of constant transformation.

The visible and the invisible aspects of our existence, mind, and matter, are inseparable counterparts that influence our everyday experience. Each dimension influences the others and is influenced in return. The world as we know it is a continually evolving combination of micro-, meso-, macro-layers which together evolve in the meta-dimension of life. Through the four dimensions of our being, aspirations, emotions, thoughts and sensations, each of us is a micro-representation of the whole. Just as one DNA double helix contains all the information of the organism that it is part of.¹ It is a spiral dynamic from the inside out, which is nurtured from the outside in.

The above may sound abstract if not opaque, yet this book is the opposite. It is a story with tools to reflect on your own experiences. You may wish to read straight through, or to pause, feel, and contemplate the content as you move through the chapters. Your choice. I aimed to limit references to a minimum to facilitate readability. If you are interested in a detailed explanation of the scientific underpinnings of the paradigm shift and the methodology that you will read about here please refer to my *Development, Humanitarian Aid and Social Welfare. Purpose for Power* (2020).

This book looks at individual introspection as an entry point to changed action (human behaviour). Building on this premise an approach to institutional self-examination is suggested for organizations that exist to help others (humanitarian work). The complementary nature of both, individual and collective insight is needed to build a more inclusive and sustainable world (social change). Independently from the line of work you are in, be it humanitarian or private sector, the following four questions may serve to start reflecting on the status quo of your life. However, they have double relevance if you are involved in social work. Because your attitude and action impacts not only your own life but the institution and the people it works for. The lives of other people depend on you.

1. Why are You here?
2. Who are You?
3. How do You want to be?
4. What does the person whom You aspire to be do?

These four questions form the logical backbone of the book. I suggest you read these questions out loud and answer them now, jotting down on paper whatever comes to your mind, be it bullet points or complete sentences, before you continue. Once you have finished reading the entire book, please do the same exercise of answering the four questions before looking at your initial answers.

What is the point of zooming in on these four basic questions? Being and doing what we desire most begins with facing the status quo. Happiness, in its very many forms and expressions, is a different experience for everyone. Your definition of happiness may not be mine or that of one of your neighbours. And unless you sit down and define clearly for yourself what it is that you aspire to in this life in order to be happy, you remain a plaything of the desires of other people. Things will just happen to you and since you are not positioned inside, you will move along outside, aligning with the positions of others. This may sometimes be fortunate, sometimes not. Overall, it is unlikely that you will reach the destination of your dreams, if you do not set yourself consciously on a clear course to steer along the way. Influence on the interplay of our aspirations, emotions, thoughts, and sensations, combined with honesty about Who we are (and who we are not), and awareness of the interconnected elements

that shape this *Who*, enables us to identity *Why* we are—the meaning of our existence; and move towards it.

To make you think, feel, act, and to aspire as we progress through the book, each chapter combines theory and practice, evidence and experience. This follows a technique that could be labeled as CCCC (consciousness, compassion, commitment, and connection) which emanates from the same overall paradigm that underpins the book. In addition, and to further assist in this endeavour, each chapter includes at least one practical exercise for you to assess if what you have just read not only make sense on paper but whether or not it works in practice for *You*. You may be tempted to read on, with the intention to try the proffered exercises sometime later. Since it is helpful to begin immediately,² I suggest you try them as proposed, while moving through the book. The exercises may be uncomfortable if you do them with genuine honesty. Respect your own pace but please start. The first step is the hardest.

Throughout the book you are guided towards the concept to understand its logic (mind); to feel what its application can be like through empathy with the story (heart); to act upon this combination of knowledge and emotion, by applying the proposed content personally (body); and finally, to share your experience with others when the resulting insights become part of your own story (soul³).

Each of these four elements, soul, heart, mind, and body relates to the four questions above (see Fig. 1). Purpose, the question of *Why* you are here is the core of your own story (aspiration). It shapes *Who* you are, impacting the way you feel about yourself and others (emotion). Once you know why you are here, ergo what matters to you, and who you are presently, you can focus and decide *How* you want to be (mind), which then influences *What* you do, and therefore What you become (body).

This book is permeated by four principles.

The first is that the reality that we experience results from apparent contrasts, which are part of the same unit. Nothing comes without its counterpart and the myriad shapes and shades that soften the transition from one extreme to the other. Everything positive has a price and everything unpleasant has a glimmer of light. Life is too complex for simply black and white, as much of our experience unfolds within the colours of the rainbow. The ‘other’ side may not always be visible immediately, yet eventually it unfolds. As stated in Zen philosophy, ‘sometimes it is the biggest gift not to get what you want most’, which is mirrored by

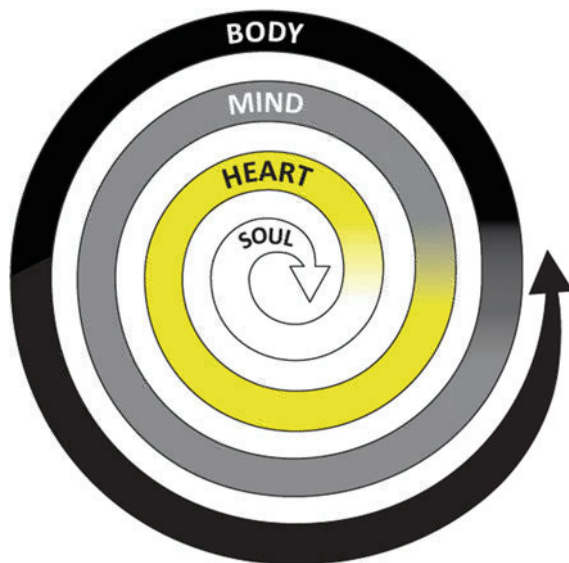


Fig. 1 Everything is connected, from the inside out and the outside in. Our soul finds its expression in our aspirations. These influence the heart, which is the source of our emotions. How we feel impacts our mind, source of our thoughts. How and what we think impacts our overall well-being, and our behaviour. Our body is the interface between our inner and outer realities. Experiences influence our mind and heart, our thoughts and feelings. The experiences that our body encounters colour our inner realm, while the latter shapes what we do, the expression of our being in the world (*Source* Author)

the Occidental saying of ‘God punishes you by granting you your biggest wish’.

The second principle is the understanding of a connected continuum, that links not only our aspirations, emotions, thoughts, and sensations within a constant interplay, but connects also individuals, communities, countries/economies, and the planet. It is this interplay that makes each of us who we are and the world what it is.

The third principle is the complementary nature of being. This fusion happens across the four dimensions of the continuum, as well as between the apparently contrasting opposites. Contrasts complement each other.

The fourth principle is change. Everything changes, always and constantly. In small and large ways reality evolves every day. Within a dynamic of impermanence every change contributes to an overall dynamic of evolution, transformation. Nothing is permanent, neither mind nor matter.

Anchored in this quadruple logic, the chapters of this book are sequenced to balance each other. Chapter one introduces my story as one illustration of the track that an individual journey of becoming, from the inside out, can take. The second chapter presents the theoretical underpinning of the logic that may serve to trigger and nurture this dynamic.⁴ The paradigm shift that is proposed in this book is age-old, applying across socio-economic contexts and educational status, as the need for meaning connects individuals beyond cultures, borders, and income. I condensed it while expanding practical ways to apply it. (The second chapter explains why it is here called POZE.) Whereas Chapters 1 and 2 focus on the inside out dynamic that underpins change, Chapter 3 widens the scope from individuals (human behaviour) to the non-profit/humanitarian work sector, looking at entities that exist to make the world a better and happier place—and, unfortunately in some cases, fail. Chapter 4 offers a set of conclusions and thoughts to pursue the journey.

Aspiration drives humans. Society is made and shaped by humans. Ergo, human aspirations are the centre of society's prosperity (or doom).⁵

Anchored in experience and research, I will make the case as to why the quest for meaning is the core of individual happiness. While acknowledging the impact of macro- and meso-level dynamics, the book shows why sustainable social change begins with mind-shifts at the micro-level and how such mind-shifts contribute to the harmonization of interpersonal relations, institutional impact, and social peace.

If an organization's mandate is its DNA, its personnel are the physical manifestation of this DNA; one without the other is irrelevant. Only if staff are authentic, does the institution appear trustworthy to the public. Points will be provided on some of the causes and consequences that have led organizations with an aspirational mandate, such as the United Nations (UN), and many humanitarian non-governmental organizations (NGO), to lose their influence and impact. Along with elements of reflection for these organizations, certain areas for institutional transformation will be suggested to nurture synchronization of institutional ambitions and individual staff attitudes.

Although the present pages are geared towards promoting social change and transformation, they are not a condemnation of the status quo or a push to quit it. Reading through the book it may appear at first sight that I doubt the concept of humanitarian and development action. This is not the case. Today more than ever before, I am convinced that the mission of social organizations is crucially needed; and many of the most inspiring people whom I have been lucky to meet are or were part of either an NGO or the UN. I do not question the Why and Who of these entities. The present pages suggest a new perspective on their What and How, and offers entry points to start with an honest internal review of the ongoing dynamics. The underpinning logic is that of a holistic, and candid look at the interplay between purpose, people, places, and power. Differently said, this book is an invitation to open a new chapter that optimizes the complementary added value of all parts of society, beginning with the individuals and organizations whose vocation it is to help.

Life is a journey, and this book is an invitation to look at it from another angle. The fact that you picked it up and read beyond the first page indicates that you seek something. This book does not provide eyes; it might merely help you to open wider those that you have already. Please look at the method that is presented here with a critical mindset, and after giving it a fair trial discard what does not make sense to you. The coming pages dare you to rethink your current perspective; it is up to you to accept it or reject this invitation. What you read may either help you identify what motivates your behaviour, possibly unbeknownst to you; or it will strengthen the connection if you are already in touch with your innermost self.

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NOTES

1. Deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) is a molecule composed of two chains that coil around each other to form a double helix, which carries genetic instructions for the development, functioning, growth, and reproduction of all known organisms and many viruses (Alberts et al. 2014). Individuals and society are marked by similar dynamics; although there are clear differences in the elements and functions that characterize the respective dimensions

that they are made of (Gould 2002), the same logic of an ongoing interaction and mutual interplay shapes their evolution. Another way to think of this interplay are the replications that result in different structures by using fractals.

2. As the Tao Zhu says in the Tao Te Ching ‘Every journey begins with one single step, no matter how small’.
3. The word ‘soul’ in the paradigm presented here is not related to dogma or religion but understood as the source of humanity’s quest for meaning. Deriving from the old French ‘*esprit*’ which comes from Latin ‘*spiritus*’ (soul, courage, breathe), the soul’s quest for meaning contributes to the individual’s inherent ability to overcome challenges and thrive despite them (Jones and Buckley 1997). It is the core of resilience.
4. This is partly done by summarizing the approach and the philosophy that was introduced in *Development, Humanitarian Aid and Social Welfare: Social Change from the Inside Out* (Walther 2020).
5. As this book goes into print (May 2020) COVID-19 engulfs the World. Declared a Pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11th, it illustrates the dramatic consequences that ensue when societies do not invest systematically in the basic social services required by all their members. When the interests of a few dominate over the needs of many. The outcome of COVID-19 depends on the ability of individuals, and of countries, to widen their perspective from me to us. Hopefully the paradigm shift that is presented in this book contributes to this change in dynamics.

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The past and present influenced my being and becoming, planting the seeds of this book. What you will read contains neither dogma nor blueprint. It has arisen from the interaction with people and circumstances over four decades; drawing on a treasure of science and spirituality that well precedes and exceeds my attempt of getting a grasp on ‘reality’. The present pages are unlikely to have been written and finalized without the interest and support, love and kindness, that I encountered while writing it. I am grateful for the gentle and candid reviews of David Stone and Enrique Delamonica; for the enthusiasm, backing, and professionalism encountered at Palgrave Macmillan, in particular by my editor Alina Yurova, and to Ashwini Elango, Azarudeen Ahamed Sheriff and Henry Moore for their skillful editing.

But the journey began before, and a book is a beautiful opportunity to give thanks to my parents, Barbara and Manfred Walther, for allowing me to choose and go my way, loving me all along. The list of those who shaped, marked, influenced, and inspired me is lengthy. Rather than singling out some at the expense of others I would like to express gratitude to all of those who crossed my path, walking with me or not. Many of those whom I was lucky to meet are gone, live on another continent, and/or may never access these pages because they cannot read. I hope that one day the philosophy that is shared here will eventually seep into the realities they are facing.

Finally, I would like to thank You for choosing this book. I hope that some of its content will serve you. There may be ideas or suggestions that you will disagree with. That is good because it means that you read and contemplated them. Leave them aside and take what is useful for your journey. Thank you for giving this book a chance to contribute to your life.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cornelia C. Walther combines praxis and research. As a humanitarian practitioner, Cornelia worked for nearly two decades with UNICEF and the World Food Program in large scale emergencies in West Africa, Afghanistan and Haiti, mostly operating as head of communication. As coach and researcher, she collaborates since 2018 with the Center for Humanitarian Leadership at Deakin University; and serves as a mentor within the Harvard Women in Defense and Diplomacy network. Being part of the European Union's Network on humanitarian assistance she lectured for five years at Aix-Marseille's Law faculty.

Aside from her interest in the multiple shapes of influence, Cornelia's focus is on social transformation from the inside out, looking at individual aspirations as the point of departure. In 2017, she initiated the POZE (*Purpose, Om, Zoom, Expression*) dynamic in Haiti, offering individuals tools to identify and pursue their aspirations. The network is now expanding into the Americas, Africa, and Europe. Her objective is to refine a methodology that influences people towards *wanting* to get involved in social change processes, rather than obliging them to act for the sake of others. She holds a Ph.D. in Law and is a certified yoga and meditation teacher. In 2020, two of her books will be published by Palgrave Macmillan/Springer, *Development, Humanitarian Action and Social Welfare*, followed by *Humanitarian Work, Social Change and Human Behavior*.

Get in touch with her via <https://www.linkedin.com/in/corneliawalther>.

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