

Seeing Systems: Peace, Justice and Sustainability Discussion Activity

Active, personally relevant learning is at the heart of an effective education. This activity takes participants through a process of exploring sustainability through shared discovery and personal reflection designed to help shape the way we think and act.

This activity offers excerpts from *Seeing Systems: Peace, Justice and Sustainability*, a 6 session discussion course used by small groups to connect the dots among three of society's most pressing challenges.

Interbeing

By Thich Nhat Hanh

If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot

grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. So we can say that the cloud and the paper inter-are. "Interbeing" is a word that is not in the dictionary yet, but if we combine the prefix "inter-" with the verb "to be," we have a new verb, inter-be.

If we look into this sheet of paper even more deeply, we can see the sunshine in it. If the sunshine is not there, the forest cannot grow. In fact, nothing can grow without sunshine. And so, we know that the sunshine is also in this sheet of paper. The paper and the sunshine inter-are. And if we continue to look, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. And we see wheat. We know the logger cannot exist without his daily bread, and therefore the wheat that became his bread is also in this sheet of

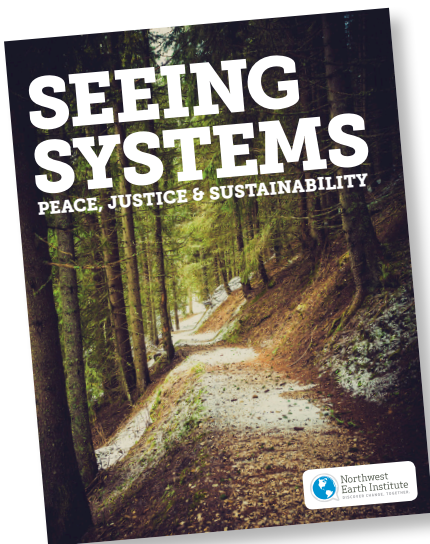
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A FEW POTENTIAL APPLICATIONS

- To get to know one another through small group dialogue.
- As an interactive way to engage in a conversation around justice and sustainability issues.
- As a way to enhance systems thinking skills.

HOW TO USE THIS TOOL

1. Gather together a group of your coworkers, classmates, friends, or family — over a healthy potluck lunch, classroom activity, or as the discussion opener for a movie screening.
2. Print off copies of this discussion guide for all members of your group.
3. Individually, take 10-12 minutes to read the excerpts in this discussion guide.
4. In small groups of 3-5, spend approximately 15-20 minutes with the discussion questions. Start with the Circle Question. Have each person briefly answer the Circle Question, with no comments, questions, or interruptions from others. Make sure each person has a chance to answer the Circle Question. Then, move on to the other questions, with participants responding voluntarily. Have group members share their opinions, experiences, feelings and suggestions.
5. During discussion, keep in mind that listening is as important as speaking. Avoid judgment of others. Agreement isn't necessary for effective dialogue.



Read more in *Seeing Systems: Peace, Justice and Sustainability*

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Purchase the complete *Seeing Systems* discussion course book and other NW Earth Institute discussion courses from NWEI's online store: www.nwei.org
- Participate in NWEI's annual EcoChallenge: www.ecochallenge.org

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paper. The logger's father and mother are in it too. When we look in this way, we see that without all of these things, this sheet of paper cannot exist.

Looking even more deeply, we can see ourselves in this sheet of paper too. This is not difficult to see, because when we look at a sheet of paper, the sheet of paper is part of our perception. Your mind is in here and mine is also. So we can say that everything is in here with this sheet of paper. We cannot point out one thing that is not here—time, space, the earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat. Everything co-exists with this sheet of paper. That is why I think the word *inter-be* should be in the dictionary. “To be” is to *inter-be*. We cannot just be

by ourselves alone. We have to *inter-be* with every other thing. This sheet of paper is, because everything else is.

Suppose we try to return one of the elements to its source. Suppose we return the sunshine to the sun. Do you think that this sheet of paper will be possible? No, without sunshine nothing can be. And if we return the logger to his mother, then we have no sheet of paper either. The fact is that this sheet of paper is made up only of “non-paper” elements. And if we return these non-paper elements to their sources, then there can be no paper at all. Without non-paper elements, like mind, logger, sunshine and so on, there will be no paper. As thin as this sheet of paper is, it contains everything in the universe in it.

From *The Heart of Understanding: Commentaries on the Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra* by Thich Nhat Hanh

Spray Glue Goes. Maggots Stay.

By Carly Lettero

My mother touched a drop of holy oil to my grandfather's forehead as he took his last breath. She leaned over him to whisper the Lord's Prayer. My sister held his hand, which stopped shaking for the first time in nearly a decade. My aunt stepped away from his bed. It was over.

I did not know what to do in the moment of death. My mother stood

next to the bed, calmly watching as the hospice nurse began to wash my grandfather's body. The nurse pulled on a pair of rubber gloves. I wondered if there was an afterlife. I wondered what my grandfather would have said if he had been able to speak these last few years. The nurse tore open a package of hermetically sealed cotton swaps. I wondered if my grandfather was reuniting with my grandmother in some joyous swirl of energy above us. I wondered if Parkinson's disease was lurking in my genes too. As the nurse ripped into a package of individually wrapped wipes and plastic padded sheets, my wonder turned to irritation. Why on Earth were we using some much disposable crap to give my grandfather his last bath?

Moments after my grandfather's death and I was thinking about garbage. What was wrong with me? I deliberately thought of things I was grateful for instead. Thank you for my mother, for my blue eyes, for the pocket full of candy you always carried. Thanks for teaching me to spit watermelon seeds, hook a worm, and appreciate garage sales. But the nurse stuffed my grandfather's hospital gown into the garbage bag, and I lost my train of thought. Why shouldn't I think about garbage? Why should I think about it only when it's convenient? Shouldn't garbage be a consideration in every moment, especially the ones that are sacred?

The nurse finished, the undertaker came and went, and I drove home long after midnight. As I tried to fall asleep, I remembered finding the body of a sea lion on the Oregon coast. Waves had rolled it from the saltwater suspension of the ocean onto the windswept beach. Sand pooled around its thick black skin and buried its flippers. Turkey vultures pecked into its stomach and chest, and black fluid flooded the holes. Closer still and the holes were crawling with bugs. Maggots slithered through the black liquid and burrowed into the soft tissue. Flies swarmed above the body, landed, got swept down the beach by a gust of wind, and swarmed again. So much life

Systems thinking is a way of approaching problems that focuses on how various elements within a system are related to and influence one another. The system in question could be organic like an ecosystem or an organism, structured like a business or manufacturing process, or more dispersed such as a supply chain. In systems thinking, seeing the relationships between the parts of a whole is as important as seeing the parts themselves.

spiraled out from this one dead animal. In stark contrast to my grandfather's death, nothing was wasted.

My generation learned how to pronounce "Chernobyl" in middle school. In high school, we watched birds suffocate in the black oil of the Exxon Valdez. We are the heirs to garbage piles that leach toxic chemicals into our groundwater and soil, an atmosphere choked with unprecedented levels of carbon dioxide, mountains that have been destroyed for coal and metal. This list, as we all know, goes on and on. I am not thankful for these things. I am heartbroken.

But I cannot forget. I feel obligated to make things better for future generations. Not just to leave things as I found them but to do everything I can to help water run cleaner and wilder and to help dwindling populations of owls thrive and to defuse the time bomb of climate change.

My sense of obligation to the future, and the slurry of emotions that goes along with it, arises out of my reverence for life. All of life. For the life of my grandfather, the [sea lion], the turkey vultures, and the maggots. For the generations I carry in my genes and will carry in my womb. And for the life of the soil, where our garbage is buried. These other expressions of life nourish my body and mind and spirit. I want to reciprocate.

We drove through the wrought iron gates of the cemetery in a funeral procession. The road wound past the graves of my great-grandparents and great-aunts and -uncles and ended in front of the mausoleum. The priest chanted in Ukrainian, then English; swung a ball of incense; drew crosses in the air with his open hands; then placed a spoonful of dry dirt on my grandfather's casket. From the Earth we came, he said, and to the Earth we must all return.

But my grandfather will not be returning to the Earth anytime soon. It seems he took every possible precaution to avoid it. He was laid to rest in a metal casket.

When the priest finished the ceremony, two men who smelled like cigar smoke and fresh dirt filed into the room. They pulled a white bag of impermeable plastic over the casket and sealed the edges with spray glue. They spoke to each other in rushed Ukrainian and managed to carry the casket outside and hoist it onto a hydraulic lift. They raised the whole package precariously toward the cold afternoon sky, slid it into a cement wall, and closed it in with a sheet of Styrofoam, a thick piece of marble, and four screws. Were bugs able to squeeze through the fortress, they would die of formaldehyde poisoning from the embalming fluid. This body entombed in a wall was no longer my grandfather. It had become toxic waste.

On the drive to the funeral luncheon at a local Polish restaurant, my thoughts turned to garbage again. Not the garbage of that moment, but the rotting trash of all the moments leading up to that one. A lifetime of cereal boxes and plastic wrap, televisions and transistor radios, ties and dress shoes, flocked synthetic Christmas trees and wrapping paper, Tupperware and microwaves, cars and tires and barrels of gasoline.

If I am to leave future generations a world that is better than the one I am inheriting, I am going to have to change almost everything, from the way I live to the way I die. It is not a matter of simply handing down a new policy or new technology. To leave things better for the future, I need to hand down traditions, like polka dancing and garage sale hunting and knowing what to do in the moment of death. Traditions take time and repetition and witness and careful attention to details. It is not easy. But my grandfather, and the generations before him, did lots of things that were not easy. They fought two world wars, survived the Great Depression, and sent a man to the moon. Can't my generation stop throwing stuff away, curb greenhouse gas emissions, and ban pollution? Thomas Jefferson once said that every generation needs a new revolution. I believe this is ours.

My grandfather handed down many of the values I'll need in these revolutionary times—hard work, steadfast determination, persistence, patience, faith, and even humor. He smiled easily, and I imagine he would smile at this too. It is a time of moral spring cleaning. It is hard to get started, but once it gets going, it feels so good. It is time to reinvent the way we live in the world and get rid of everything that is not working. The spray glue goes. The maggots stay.

When I die, wash my body with a cotton cloth. Bury me in a splitwood coffin crafted from trees that died a natural death. Lay me to rest in clothes I have already worn thin. Do not seal out the water and bugs and burrowing critters. Let me be absorbed back into the Earth. Let my body turn to soil. Even when I'm dead, let me nourish the future.

Dropping Walls Takes Care, Time

By Bob Welch

Recently, I found myself thinking of walls. Not the kind you can see. But the invisible walls that separate us from one another. The racial walls. The religious, political, age, ethnic, gender and sexual orientation walls. The growth/no-growth walls. The union/management walls. The ban-Christmas-trees/over-my-dead-body walls.

The walls that prevent us from experiencing much of the "unity" of community, leaving us, instead, lobbing our guilt-packed grenades back



and forth at each other in letters to the editor.

What, I wondered, is the answer to breaking down such walls?

I won't pretend to give a complete answer to that one — but I'm convinced it begins with one thing: Talking less. Listening more.

I base that in part on what I've seen in the work of a woman named Gayle Landt, director of the Eugene-based Conflict Resolution Center. Though Eugene too often lives up to its reputation as the most contentious community on the planet, Landt is among those who toil in the shadows to try to change that.

A mediator, she spearheaded the New Community Meeting in 1994, which brought together gay rights activists and conservative Christian leaders for 100 hours of discussion in the aftermath of the Measure 13 debate. And in 1998, she did something similar with environmentalists and business leaders.

The results? Not only did the two sides in each case agree on a number of principles and suggestions, but they began seeing each other in different ways. After the New Community project, gay-rights activist Nadia Telsey and evangelical Christian pastor John Koekkoek spoke of new insight and respect for each other.

Did they two change their core convictions about homosexuality? No. But they came to a place, they said, where they genuinely cared about each other. And that's a start. "As people, we mostly talk but don't listen to one another," says Landt. "If we talk better we think we'll get what we want. But a lot of times if we listen better, there's a better chance."

Not that that's standard operating procedure around here. "There's a lot of polarization in Oregon," says Landt. "We're kind of an adolescent culture, meaning people accept quick, shallow

assessments of what's going on and offer quick, emotional responses. That leads to enemy-building." The problem with that, she says, is that enemies don't just "go away" after an issue is decided. Instead, communities engage in cold wars that go on and on. The issues keep repeating themselves, like the background of an old Roadrunner cartoon while Wile E. Coyote and his rival try desperately to smite one another.

Instead of shades of gray, we become communities where people see only black and white, heroes and villains — and nothing in between. And the media can compound problems by missing those shades of gray, too, says Landt, with some justification. But, she says, if you can get people out of their comfort zones and into the same room — if they'll just try listening to each other instead of playing Roadrunner — good things happen.

For example, stereotypes break down and people find they have common interests. After the environment/business sessions, Oregon Country Fair manager Leslie Scott says, "What struck me from the very beginning was how much everyone loves this place."

Landt begins the sessions getting people to agree on two points: that they all live in this community together and that "the means are the ends in the making." In other words, the level of civility people use in dealing with each other is as significant as the issues themselves.

"When we first brought up the idea for the New Community Meeting," says Landt, "people said two things: 'Oh, no, it'll never work.' And that it would take too much time."

Landt pulls out an article about a school in Israel — Neve Shalom Wahat Al-Salam — where Jews and Arabs have merged cultures to prove people with a history of hate for each other can overcome that. Founded in 1972

by a Dominican monk, it's the only educational framework in Israel where Arab and Jewish children learn together in both languages. "If they can do it, we can do it," says Landt.

It isn't simple, she says, nor done with the usual quick-fix speed we're used to. "It happens when we stop, search our hearts and choose to listen to each other," she says. It happens at ground level, with ordinary folks like you and me. And it happens — this tearing down of the wall — the same way it began: One brick at a time.

CIRCLE QUESTION

Name three systems of which you are a part.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do Thich Nhat Hanh's ideas of 'interbeing' apply to things other than this piece of paper (for example: jet planes, your cell phone, the burrito you ate for lunch)?
2. If you were to write a story about a meaningful experience in your own life similar to Carly Lettero's "Spray Glue Goes. Maggots Stay", what would you choose to keep and what would you want to change?
3. Carly Lettero says, "Even when I'm dead, let me nourish the future." What lifestyle choices can you make so that your life "nourishes the future"?
4. How do the recommendations made in "Dropping Walls Takes Care, Time" apply to social justice issues?
5. What walls need to be torn down in your region or area of influence? How can you start tearing them down with others?