

A CONVERSATION WITH AFTAB OMER AND MELISSA SCHWARTZ: THE COMMONS AND EDUCATION FOR CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION

Interviewed by Riane Eisler, JD, PhD(hon)

Abstract

Riane Eisler talks with Aftab Omer and Melissa Schwartz of Meridian University about the role of transformative learning within higher education institutions and its importance in regenerating and transforming culture.

Keywords: transformative learning; commons; caring; interdependence; collaborativity; cultural leadership; partnership trust; partnership power; complexity capability; partnership capability; ritual trust; empathic imagination; Meridian University; higher education.

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Riane Eisler: Thank you, Aftab and Melissa, for the important work you do at Meridian University that is so aligned with the cultural shift from domination to partnership. As you know, this journal is dedicated to gathering and publishing the best scholarship on this subject, as well as contributions from practitioners and others working to facilitate and accelerate this shift. The vision of our journal is “To share scholarship and create connections for cultural transformation to build a world in which all relationships, institutions, policies, and organizations are based on principles of partnership.” A more compassionate and caring education that tells a new, more accurate, and more hopeful story of human nature and human possibilities is an essential component of shifting our communities, including our commons, to partnership. So your work at Meridian is

directly relevant to this cultural transformation in all aspects of our lives, including the commons.

I like to start interviews on a personal note. Could you tell us what in your own lives led you to the work you have done and are doing at Meridian University?

Melissa Schwartz: Riane, thank you for your interest and this invitation to reflect on the implications of the work at Meridian University for partnership systems.

As I consider my own personal journey into higher education, I am reminded that even as a teenager I had a deep sense that education should be far more relevant and enlivening than the long, tedious days I spent in school. After high school, I attended Clark University, and even though I was so compelled by my studies in literature, philosophy, and community studies, the process of learning itself seemed to me disconnected with the content of what I was learning. And so I became interested in other ways of learning and began to look for innovative educational institutions that were emerging. I eventually completed my doctorate in varying ways that were congruent with my preference for experience-based learning.

My work in higher education is deeply influenced by the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, and by Jean Baker Miller, whose work is foundational to the psychology of women. Educating practitioners who work in practical ways while engaging in qualitative inquiry is deeply meaningful for me. And my own research and teaching on the psychology of women, specifically women as learners, has been relevant to my work at Meridian University, every day, over the last 30 years.

Aftab Omer: I did not consciously set out to become an educator. Of course, in retrospect, influences and forks in the road can be seen more readily. Witnessing the suffering of oppression in the countries I grew up in deeply affected my moral and emotional experience as a child and teenager. My parents' commitments, as well as

that of some teachers, were significantly helpful in beginning to make sense of the social worlds that I was awakening to.

My father was intensely engaged in the struggles against colonial occupation, and eventually co-founded a university in Pakistan after independence in 1947. The warmth and challenges of university life shaped our lives as a family; for example, as a child I learned to swim in this university's swimming pool, feeling cared for by the university's faculty and students.

My mother worked for the United Nations Development Programme and as a professor of social development. She had also done graduate studies in Persian literature, and this imbued our home with Jalaluddin Rumi's poetic and moral imagination. My elementary school experiences were creative and inspiring, while my experiences in a junior high run by the military were disturbing. While I was a teenager living in Turkey, I was able to spend formative time in Greece inspired by its archeological and mythological backgrounds. I still return regularly to Greece, sometimes with students.

During my university years I was influenced by my studies with Noam Chomsky and Joseph Campbell as well as the work of Paulo Freire and the Frankfurt School of Social Research. My doctoral dissertation focused on the undermining of learning in educational organizations, in particular the role of experience and otherness. Many years earlier my mother's dissertation at Brandeis University had been about the building of democratic institutions in four developing countries. I participated in her research, and so it seems that I was destined to work on the role of education in social change towards democracy; looking back, I see this as a through line.

Eisler: Please tell us more about Meridian University.

Omer: Founded 30 years ago, Meridian University educates professional practitioners with the complexity capabilities necessary for empowering the development of whole persons and whole systems. This embodies a shift from education as *training* to

education as *development*. This shift has entailed a focus on experience, especially on imagination and emotion, and how these dimensions enable the development of complexity capabilities, including partnership capability.

In addition, an understanding of culture, systems, and relational fields has been foundational to nurturing systems development through the power of ritualization. Traditional ritual preserves and reproduces culture, while creative ritual *creates* culture. Creative ritual both *requires* partnership capability and *builds* partnership capability. This is a way of activating *ritual trust*, which entails a suspension of differences and conflicts, liberating a revitalized relatedness. This emphasis on ritualization is central to how cultural leadership transforms culture through *creative transgression*.

Schwartz: Right from the start, Meridian's curriculum, in its learning praxis, emphasized exploring the student's lived experience. In the context of higher education, this is enabled through a careful integration of informational learning, in support of training, but along with transformative learning, in support of *development*.

Transformative learning is experiential, embodied, relational, systemic, integral, transcultural, and dialogic. Each of these seven characteristics demands more imagination and discipline from faculty and students than is typically expected in higher education. Of course, this remains an ongoing challenge to institutional effectiveness, as this intent pervades the learning outcomes for all programs, not just the Education program at Meridian University.

We balance this demanding nature of transformative learning with an emphasis on systemic practices in support of individual and collective well-being. This is necessary to sustain the ongoing cycles of liminality that are intrinsic and inherent to transformative learning.

Beyond the praxis of learning, the *content* of each program's curriculum is designed to be transcultural and transdisciplinary, drawing from such knowledge domains as mythology, literature, expressive arts, somatic practices, cultural history, mystical philosophy, and indigenous wisdom.

Eisler: Tell us about Meridian's new concentration in Partnership Systems and its importance in changing the prevailing view of the commons in a partnership direction.

Schwartz: The new concentration in Partnership Systems is available to master's and doctoral students in the Psychology and Education programs. The intent is for graduates in the course of their professional work to facilitate the development of partnership capabilities as *partnership system practitioners*.

We are imagining partnership system practitioners as individuals who are responding to crises and opportunities within intimate systems, teams, organizations, communities, and societies. Partnership systems practitioners are needed at scale to engage the cascading crises that are now endemic to a world system structured by domination systems.

Omer: Some of the themes that hold significant emphasis within this concentration are partnership trust, cultural synergy, partnership power, affective neuroscience, relational and emotional development, collective trauma, gender oppression, regenerative economics, interdependence, mutuality, accountability, cultural leadership, coalition building, and restorative justice.

Eisler: Can you say more about education for partnership capabilities?

Omer: Given our developmental curriculum, we focus on relational development, which is an actualization of relational capabilities with each wave of maturation. Within the broad frame of relational capabilities, we recognize the significance of collaborative capability, which we have termed *collaborativity*, conceptualized as the capacity to

associate with others in ways that foster individuality, autonomy, empathy, mutuality, complexity, dependability, reciprocity, and synergy.

Partnership capability more specifically can be understood as modes of relating that activate domains of mutuality and synergy, which are structured by the caring that empathic imagination fosters. *Empathic imagination* refers to the mode of imagination most relevant to relatedness between humans as well as human relatedness to the *more than human*. With advancing partnership capability, systems are able to actualize partnership trust and partnership power, so critical to regenerating the commons. So, a system's partnership capability sets the ceiling for its regenerative capability.

Schwartz: In order to be an effective practitioner, whether as a partnership systems practitioner or another kind of professional practitioner, it is essential for the practitioner to have honed relational capabilities.

“Relational” implies awareness of one's effect on others, while at the same time awareness of how one's self is affected. With relational development, one is able to stay present in the face of conflicts and to ‘hang in’ with difficult relationships and difficult times in relationships.

Engaging a person as a whole person recognizes that an individual person is also a system. Relational capability is enhanced as the individual recognizes themselves as a system and becomes curious about one's own *psychological multiplicity*, referring by this term to the existence of many distinct and often encapsulated centers of subjectivity within the experience of the same individual.

Empathic imagination, the ability to imagine the other person's experience, does not necessarily imply that one will accurately imagine the other's experience. However, the effort involved in this kind of practice, amid conflict and emotional agitation, grows relational capability.

Eisler: What are some of the obstacles to education for partnership capabilities, and how can they be overcome?

Schwartz: In many ways, educational institutions are agents of the state and the market. As such, an education for partnership capabilities will be constrained by the context in which the institution is situated. This is true no matter how earnest the faculty or how noble the goals of the institution. The student is still depending on the faculty's assessment of their 'performance' to earn course credit, the faculty are depending on the students' evaluation of their own performance, and the institution must operate inside various regulatory requirements to maintain its legal standing. All these factors bring forth visible and invisible obstacles to the development of partnership capabilities within educational initiatives.

These obstacles can be mitigated through collective awareness practices that recognize and engage difference instead of disavowing, suppressing, and denying difference. Engaging the transgenerational axis is now key to regenerating the cultural commons.

Omer: Everyone has at least some negative experience with dependence. So, while we as humans are endowed with an essential or primal trust toward other humans, our maturation towards independence includes some ambivalence about dependence. Partnership flourishes in a culture of interdependence, so it is necessary to go beyond conflicts about dependence. Such conflicts can present as obstacles, but only until these conflicts have been transmuted into partnership capability. Ritualizations of accountability play a critical role here.

The conflicts that emerge in our individual and collective journeys of development manifest in our habits of power. Domination systems not only colonize cultures and society, but they also colonize personal experience, in effect *enclosing* experience. Such enclosures of experience are maintained through *cultural gatekeeping* of various kinds, including consumerism.

The individual and collective dynamics of envy are both symptoms and drivers of the inequities that characterize domination systems. So it is necessary for the educational organization itself to be a partnership system, with ongoing practices that monitor rising *gatekeeping dynamics* at each significant threshold of transformation.

Cultural gatekeeping is also at work when “professionalism” as an ideology veils the use of professions as a means for domination and social control. Transforming the professions is a challenge to the ways that professions are a means for state and market enclosure of the commons. For the professions to be more commons-centered requires enhanced partnership capabilities. As partnership capabilities develop, systems are increasingly accountable for power differentials, enabling the synergies of *partnership power*.

Eisler: What role can other scholars play in accelerating the shift toward a whole systems-based education, an education that helps accelerate the cultural shift from domination to partnership in the commons as well as in society generally?

Schwartz: One of the most important steps we can take is to engage in in-depth inquiry about the ways in which we ourselves benefit from domination systems enacted within higher education. It is so important to our psychological wholeness to ‘own’ the ways in which we resist giving up these benefits. These resistances typically remain beneath the surface of our awareness despite our conscious intentions. This results in consequences that are contrary to our intentions.

Sustaining a culture of scholarship is optimally achieved when scholars are also practitioners. As they say across the pond, “The proof is in the pudding.” A culture of practitioner scholarship links partnered inquiry with partnered, pragmatic applications to real-world professional practice.

Omer: To generate and sustain an authentic culture of scholarship we must intensify the practices that support the regeneration of the cultural commons. Otherwise, scholarship itself becomes yet another domain for enclosure.

Our emergence as a species who has both evolved culture and was evolved by culture has profound origins in partnership. It is the role of a coherent culture to enable individual development for belonging. And partnership sustains belonging. As a culture develops, in addition to belonging, cultures can empower *becoming*. In this way culture can support the expression of individuality and the democratic possibilities of such a trajectory.

Aftab Omer, PhD, is a sociologist, psychologist, futurist, and the president of Meridian University. Raised in Pakistan, India, Hawaii, and Turkey, he was educated at M.I.T and Harvard and Brandeis Universities. His publications have addressed transformative learning, cultural leadership, generative entrepreneurship, and the power of imagination. His work includes assisting organizations in tapping the creative potentials of conflict, diversity, and complexity. Formerly the president of the Council for Humanistic and Transpersonal Psychologies, he is a Fellow of the International Futures Forum and the World Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Aftab's work at Meridian University over the last 30 years has emphasized the development of partnership capability. In an influential article titled "The Spacious Center: Leadership and the Creative Transformation of Culture" published in 2006, he introduced a new framework for understanding when culture transforms through cultural leadership.

Melissa Schwartz, PhD, is the Chief Academic Officer at Meridian University where she guides integrally oriented programs in Education, Business, and Psychology. The Director of Meridian's Center for Transformative Learning, Melissa is dually licensed as a psychologist and as a Marriage and Family Therapist. She serves as a reviewer for the American Psychological Association's Journal, *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, and the California Psychological Association's Office of Professional Development.

Melissa's research interests are in the areas of adult development, the psychology of women, integral transformative assessment, and the role of culture in transformative learning.

Riane Eisler, JD, PhD (hon), is president of the Center for Partnership Studies, Editor-in-Chief of the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies*, and author of *The Chalice and The Blade: Our History, Our Future*; *Sacred Pleasure*; *Tomorrow's Children*; *The Power of Partnership*; and *The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics*. Her recent *Nurturing Our Humanity: How Domination and Partnership Shape Our Brains, Lives, and Future* (co-authored with Douglas Fry) combines her research with findings from the social and biological sciences, especially neuroscience. Eisler keynotes conferences worldwide and consults for governments on the partnership model. She authored over 500 articles for outlets including *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Human Rights Quarterly*, and *International Journal of Women's Studies*.

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