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Cultivating Human Potential – Towards Flourishing of All

By Scherto Gill

Introduction

Individual unique potential and collective/communal human potential are interdependent and mutually enriching – each person's unique potential is best achieved by participating and engaging in common endeavours and shared ventures with others; and our collective human potential is best attained through fostering and nurturing the individual's specific qualities and capacities. Such mutuality also suggests that any attempt to support our personal growth will equally enhance our human system, all effecting greater social change.

In this article, human potential refers to the vital energy and qualities that provide meaning, purpose and direction to individual and collective life.¹ To understand the interdependent nature of human being and becoming and how we might support the unfolding of an individual's unique potential and our collective human potential towards flourishing of all, I will first explore three interrelated aspects fundamental to our conception of human potential, and then take the Spirit of Humanity Forum as a case-in-point to illustrate the importance of nurturing such interdependence. In particular, I would show that key relational processes, such as, safe and open space, practising silence, sharing narrative, engaging in dialogue/encounter and listening, can help cultivate and inspire each leader's unique personal and professional qualities and spirituality which are essential to supporting the flourishing of human potential as a whole, and the thriving of our societies and communities.

¹ In this article, the term 'human potential' refers our collective experience and 'unique potential' refers to that of the individual.

The interdependent nature of human being and becoming

Human life is simultaneously material, intellectual, social, moral and spiritual and comprises diverse experiences, activities and processes. As life itself has intrinsic value, so does the person who is living such a life. At the same time, being human is being aware that we are finite, and our personal qualities, habits, worldviews are always situated in our histories, memories, collective wounds, religious teachings, cultural practices and socio-economic and political institutions. So it is imperative for us to engage with others (including the Divine Other) and to be in a relationship with others in order to overcome our limitedness, transcend human conditions and achieve our individual and collective potential. In this way, our being and becoming is not only enriched by those others we encounter, but is also co-dependent on the growth of others and humanity as a whole. This perspective on human life can offer insights to three interconnected aspects on the way we conceptualise human potential. Let's explore them in turn.

a. Human potential as our gift to each other

Many thinkers have long pointed out the irreducible importance of other people in one's own life and the intersubjective nature of transcendent human conditions. For instance, Scottish philosopher John Macmurray has proposed that the presence of others is essential in our own being as humans. He writes that there can be no person whatsoever, without two persons in relation.² He goes as far as claiming that 'we need one another to be ourselves,' highlighting the relational way of our being.³ This relationship characterises the natural way that we take delight in the each other's being for its own sake. Macmurray claims that it is the only way to be human. Likewise, French philosopher Gabriel Marcel, when discussing the nature of human relationship, stresses the notion of *with*, and its metaphysical value, as a genuine *coesse*, or *being-with*.⁴ Being human is thus being-with (other humans and the Divine Other), a participatory relationship which requires an openness towards others and an intimacy with others. In this way, Marcel argues, being is communing.

To be with someone, is to make oneself truly available to the other. Such availing is equivalent to giving (and on the other's part, receiving) and in the giving and receiving, we transcend the boundaries between people through love. To avail ourselves to others is to hope for the possibility of others to unfold their potential, especially when we actively create an environment in which others can so respond. In this way, being-with becomes our responsibility for each other and being-with or communing encourages us to become more ourselves, or to be more fully human.

Nurturing individual potential through communing is our shared aspiration for human transcendence. This aspiration in turn enables us to strive to become more complete, into the wholeness that we are, a kind of mutual-humanisation. As Gabriel Marcel proposes, being human is a *vocation* (not in a religious sense) and it is in responding to the call for

² John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, London: Faber, 1961.

³ Macmurray, 1961, p. 211.

⁴ Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, London: The Harvill Press, 1951.

presence and relationship with others that we become more fully human.⁵ Thus, any seeking for meaning and purpose involves the returning to and affirming of one's own humanity (and human qualities) and the humanity of other people. Mutual nurturing and mutual humanising is the greatest gift we can offer to each other.

b. The 'we-ness' at the core of human flourishing

When understanding human potential from such a relational perspective, we can see that each person is a *participating* subject whose unique potential is only achieved through relationships with others – a co-presence in the world. The notion of a participating subject implies that as a person, one finds friendship/fellowship with others in that: 'I am a being *among* beings.' This leads us to suggest a further point that each person is also a *contributing* subject, in that 'I am a being *for* other beings,' whose being is realised through a form of care, respect and deep concern for others in the world. We each participate and contribute through our being and availing ourselves to others, through our growth and development, our synergetic relationship with others and through our service to others and to the world at large. So unfolding human potential always takes place within the realm of the 'we.'

To be aware of this 'we-ness' can help reduce the risk of our unfolding becoming egoistic and individualistic. When one is too preoccupied with oneself, one cannot make room for the presence of others and/or be the presence to others and in the world. Self-absorption can also be a form of alienation, alienation from others and from the world, which is a direct consequence of alienation from oneself, a withdrawal, the closing oneself off from communing.⁶ Paulo Freire elucidates this point further and encourages us to reject any suggestion, implicit or explicit, that a human being is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; equally Freire objects to any proposition that the world exists as a reality apart from people.⁷ Instead, he evokes an interconnectedness between persons and the world. That is to say, we are not merely persons in the world, but rather we are persons *with* others and *with* the world.⁸ Unfolding human potential involves keeping alive our mutually constituted relationship with the world and our duty of care for the world by proactively transforming the world and human lives within it.

We-ness implies self-reflectiveness in that each can recognise oneself and each other as 'we' or 'us.' Accordingly, this self-reflective we-ness can transform the bonds between people from the interpersonal (as a relation among persons) to the collective intrapersonal (as a relation between members of a group). Such bonds can further enable our being and acting to become communal where personal aims are essentially collective, e.g. ours. Communal activities or doing things together as a collective endeavour towards something that is most desirable for all, such as peace, is not only possible but it is also in the human's fundamental interests and well-being to do so.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, London: Continuum, 1970.

⁸ Ibid.

c. Human potential through right relationships

Well-being is a state of complete harmony of the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual.⁹ From this, we can derive that human being and human life can only be holistically perceived, from the material to the spiritual, from the lived to the transcendent. This wholeness is also reflected in the harmonious nature of all relationships embedded in the unfolding of human potential – a common striving for forming a delightful, consistent and coherent whole. This harmony is articulated by Earth Charter as right relationships.

The right relationships suggest that humans must seek to live rightly and wisely and in accord with the harmony of the cosmos/universe. Martin Buber proposes that the right relationship can be captured in dialogue.¹⁰ The life of dialogue involves the turning towards the other, not by seeking but by grace, as if we are called to dialogue, and in dialogue we consolidate our relationship with others and the spirit.

Silence and listening are key to dialogue. Attentive silence is active, and is a welcoming acceptance of the other; and any word born out of silence is received in silence. In silence arises the stillness, which is located in an in-betweenness of oneself and the other, a generative space. Listening is a form of love and when the community is a safe space, people are able to venture beyond rhetorical harmony and listen in ways that not only accept but also seek tension in our perspectives, values and worldviews. Listening thus can build the impetus of dialogue and invite the urge towards resolution, reconciliation and understanding, consolidating our relationships. Listening in dialogue is deep and involves suspension, silence, inner dialogue, inhabiting within one's own horizon, and self-transcendence.

So far, I have taken a closer look at three interconnected aspects in our understanding of the interdependence between individual and collective human potential, all of which would have implications on how we might pursue the flourishing of all agendas. For instance, this understanding immediately points to the need for systemic shift where right relationships can be inspired and where there is a sense of we-ness among all that is. Also highlighted is the need for deep *inner-work* that will enable us to participate in the mystery of being. Turning inwardly towards human spirit in our personal and professional life could further transform our socio-political and economic structure and institutional culture, as well as in the way we educate, leading to systemic change. Equally urgent is the need for dialogue and listening within social organisations and political institutions, especially when values are found in multiple expressions and our purpose and meaning articulated in myriad voices. When we listen so deeply and from the place of love, we might hear each other into words, into relationship, into action.

⁹ This has been captured by an integrated framework developed by Learning for Well-being.

¹⁰ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, New York: Scribner, 1958.

Cultivating human potential: the case of the Spirit of Humanity Forum

At the intersection of individual and collective human potential is an authentic energy – the human spirit. This is where peace, justice and flourishing spring from. To inspire political commitment towards creating optimal conditions and the right relationships for human spirit to blossom, it is necessary to support global leaders and change-makers who have the courage to actively live out an undivided life, integrating the wholeness of our being. In other words, to nurture human spirit in our global leaders and change-makers is the beginning of the process towards systemic change. This is precisely the focus of the Spirit of Humanity (SoH) Forum.

The SoH Forum is a partnership organisation.¹¹ It was founded at a time when our world is threatened by violence and aggressions, the vulnerable human psyche of fear and desperation, and the irreversible damage inflicted on the delicate balance in the eco-systems of our planet. This is compounded by the social gulfs, political segregations and religious divides, separating our communities into us and them. All these have given an impression that our world is broken, as if the heart that was once here has stopped beating. There is so little space for mystery, for recognising the richest and fullest beings that we are. Without mystery, our world seems to be riddled with problems, and the more we treat the world as a problem, the more problems seem to appear, and with them, the woundedness, self-absorption and alienation.

To be sure, as responses to this brokenness, there have been movements and initiatives centred on structural reform, social justice, human rights and equalities. Likewise, there are also processes focusing on inner tranquillity and contemplative life. What seems to be required is to integrate these two external/systematic and internal/spiritual processes to create a loving and peaceful world.

In this context, the SoH Forum has been created to promote the innermost reshaping in our global leaders and change-makers. This is seen as part of our 'duty of care' for our world, the planet and humanity as a whole. Underlying the notion of care is also a recognition of the sacredness in being human and in all things in nature, and of the interdependence of the individual and collective flourishing. So to this end, the SoH Forum offers a global platform for leaders and change-makers to gather together for encounter, dialogue and mutual learning. In particular, the Forum focuses on encouraging spirituality in leadership, and explores new forms of values-based governance underpinned by care, respect, trust and relationships.

Since 2011, the Forum has found a home in Reykjavik especially due to the City's commitments to peace and its achievement in aspiring to become a world Capital of Peace. Reykjavik places great emphasis on human values in its work and policy and Iceland has created an environment where humans and nature celebrate close ties. In caring for all the beings on this land/island, Iceland has become the greenest country in the world, demonstrating that true peacefulness and flourishing is rooted in the right relationships

¹¹ I am a board member of the SoH Forum, and a member of its Executive Circle.

among all that is. Thus Reykjavik serves as an excellent venue for leaders and change-makers to not only discuss and dialogue about these matters but also experience first-hand the wholeness of our being.

The main activities of the SoH Forum range from a bi-annual 3-day Global Forum, regional Forum events throughout the year, a community of practice, the regular newsletters, and an annual publication of selected articles and papers written by the participants of the Forums.

In the space below, I will discuss a few features of the SoH Forum events in order to illustrate how it sets out to nurture the leaders and change-makers' qualities, who in turn support the unfolding of human potential through their social and political endeavours.

Safe and open space



In each SoH Forum event, the partners strive to create a safe and open space within which the participants can encounter, explore and experience. It is a richly human space, arisen from the purest intention and collective will. It integrates a relational space between the participants and an innermost space within each person him/herself. Within such a safe and open space, people seem to discover their authentic qualities and voices. For example, a quiet, shy young woman, who attended the most recent Forum, was so encouraged and empowered by this unique space that she came forward and conducted a 'symphony,' spontaneous and improvised music-making performed by all the participants together. As such, a safe and open space invites an engagement in the Forum's activities from the depth of who we truly are rather than from fear, pride or ego, and is nourishing and affirming.

Silence



During Forum events, each day starts with a period of sustained silence. As already discussed, silence is an active and more developed form of availing, and it is a presence, or communing. In contrast to non-presence/passivity, which results in fear, hesitancy and powerlessness, our presence through silence can transform the life and experience of each other in a most constructive sense. In other words, by immersing oneself in the mysteries of each other and by availing oneself to others, we set out on a journey to become whole human beings.

Narrative sharing and co-authoring



The Forum encourages narrative sharing. From the heads of state, to grassroots activists, from religious leaders to young people, the participants narrate the richest personal life stories of change, healing and transformation. These stories then become the narrative of our community, further strengthening a we-ness, celebrating myriad traditions, and co-constructing meanings in our life. In one of the Forums, when five women from different continents performed their respective stories of applying feminine wisdom in seeking peace amidst chaos, violence and discrimination, they were co-authoring the shared narrative of human spirit – the true anchor of human potential.

Dialogue and listening



Each Forum event is a dialogue, in silence, in the interchange between the presenters, during experiential workshops, in small group conversation, and throughout the informal spaces such as breaks and mealtimes. Such dialogue is the meeting of souls, a participant once told us, because it can only take place between whole beings, and that always involves our spiritual or higher self. As already touched upon, deep listening is the key to such dialogue. In one of the workshops entitled 'What is my responsibility for peace,' the participants were invited to enter into a dialogue with one's ancestors, and in the power of listening, they each had a profound experience of the importance of compassion and forgiveness in peacebuilding.

Conclusion

In this article, I explored a conception of human potential which stresses the interdependent nature of individual and collective flourishing. In doing so, I highlighted an idea that imbedded in our well-being is our relationship with others, with other communities, and with our world, including our planet. Only in the right relationships can life become whole, and only by unfolding our human potential can we live in such right relationships. Both require an urgent inner-reshaping. By turning to human spirit, we can truly take responsibility to care – care for each other and care for the world.

As illustrated by the SoH Forum's intentions and processes, such inner-reshaping through safe space, silence, narrative sharing, dialogue and listening, can be world-making – in nurturing and affirming the energies and qualities of global leaders and change-makers, in the unfolding of our individual and collective human potential, we also create a world in which all can flourish.

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