

Introduction: We Need a Better Theory

From: The Regenerative Life: Transform Any Organization, Our Society, Your Destiny. By Carol Sanford. Copyrighted material and may not be duplicated. Published March 2020 by Nicholas Brealey, a Hachette Company.

I believe that most of us grow up with a pretty limited understanding of what it takes for an individual to create real change in the world. I base my belief on three basic narratives that I see repeated over and over. The first is the hero hypothesis—to save the day, a person needs to be superior, endowed with extraordinary skill and resources, staunchly committed to carrying the banner, fighting the good fight, and rousing the world out of its torpor, so that it lives up to the ideals they hold for it. The second is that, if we can't be a hero, then we need to find and follow a heroic leader, a charismatic someone who inspires us to pursue an ideal. The third is that if we are as good as we can be, if we work long hours, recycle and compost, vote and donate, and especially if we are kind to dogs and children, then everything will be fine in the end.

Personally, I don't think we need more heroes or authorities. Those are storylines that reinforce the egoistic delusion that people are isolated actors who through sheer force of will can bend the world to their visions. By definition, only a few of us can be heroes, geniuses, or saints, which means that the rest of us are just clay waiting to be molded. What a terrible waste of human potential, spirit, intelligence, and creativity! It's interesting to note how easily we devalue ourselves and other people when we adopt a heroic mode.

I also see a built-in problem with the idea of doing good. There's a reason why people don't like do-gooders: they operate from the assumption that some people or some actions are by definition more virtuous than others. That is, goodness is a general standard or ideal, rather than something that arises from specific people within a specific set of circumstances. So it is *good* to reduce your consumption of resources, or go to church, or decry racism, because, "Well, it's self-evident isn't it?"

Usually these definitions of virtue are based on cultural or subcultural agreements (for example, political correctness or Christian piety) that are passed down generation to generation and therefore remain relatively unexamined. But these ideas of goodness are generic and rob us of our responsibility to discover and choose ways of thinking and acting that might truly transform the specific situations we encounter in life.

For these reasons, I believe we need a better theory of change, one that goes beyond the heroic and do-good models, and taps into, develops, and releases the inherent potential of every human being to live in ways that make meaningful contributions to the world. Everything that follows in this book comes out of a theory of change that is:

- *Developmental*—building systems thinking skills and personal mastery
- *Essence sourced*—based on that which makes every person or living thing specific and singular
- *Regenerative*—committed to realizing the evolutionary potential of life
- *Grounded*—because it's based on the idea that we can transform our world by transforming the roles we play in our lives

It is, in other words, rooted in the evolutionary potential of human lives.

Dog Lawyer

Like most small children, I had a lot of will when I was very young. But unlike many, the difficulties of my circumstances only served to strengthen this will. I grew up in a broken and abusive family, in a broken place (the Texas panhandle), the granddaughter on my mother's side of a Native American man who had escaped the brokenness of early twentieth century reservation life. My father was the Grand Dragon of the Texas KKK. When I was small, he locked me in a closet as a way to

break my will. It didn't work. Instead it reinforced my desire to stand up to him, to be a hero, and to break the corrosive influence of racism in my world.

There were many reasons for despair in my young life, but I was able again and again to allay my fears about the injustices of my world with fantasies of taking heroic actions to address them. One of my earliest ambitions was to be a dog lawyer! I thought it was outrageous that dogs were rounded up and put to sleep, through no fault of their own and with no one to defend them. I was determined to become a heroic little-girl advocate for animal innocence.

By the time I was at university in the mid-60s, I was putting my body on the line, marching in Berkeley to end racism and the Vietnam War. This earned me my first and only visit to jail and made me wonder where I would wind up in the long term. Was taking to the streets really making any kind of meaningful difference? I was beginning to have my doubts.

Not sure that I could be the hero I had imagined myself to be, I looked for heroes to support—political candidates who advocated radical change to the system and intellectual leaders who were pointing to different ways to live in society. For a short while, Joseph Campbell reignited my excitement about the hero's journey, and I vowed once again to dedicate myself to changing the world. I was probably still too immature to fully grasp two things Campbell was teaching us. First, the mythic hero's journey is always in service to and supported by a community. Second, it is intended to achieve some larger beneficial effect; the hero returns with a treasure that will alter the community's role within its world. Ultimately there is no independent heroic ego, only the collective work of sustaining and evolving life by reshaping the relationships between the community and its larger context.

At some point, I began to study with inventor and philosopher Arthur Young, founder of the Institute for the Study of Consciousness in Berkeley. Young had, among other things, invented the first long distance helicopter. But his real interest

was the thinking process that allowed people to accomplish these kinds of breakthroughs. He advocated for a process philosophy, one that directed its attention to inner development rather than outward advocacy and action.

These themes continued to work on me. Where was that heroic vision of my childhood? Could I ever become a hero? If not, then who was I? Was life really worth living? Pressed to make meaning of my life, yet seemingly denied outlets for these energies, I threw myself into a kind of compromise—be a good citizen. I volunteered with the League of Women Voters, struggled to be a good mother, separated my recyclable garbage. This way of life came nowhere close to satisfying my powerful inner promptings, and I began to slip into despair. What I failed to realize was that I didn't have an adequate theory of change. I believed that change came only from heroes and saints acting on behalf of all the small people around them.

Developing People

Happily, it was at this moment that I met a network of change designers based in Carmel, California. This group had discovered that profound change could happen through the almost invisible work of *developing the capacity of ordinary people to see things differently*. My advocacy work had been based on the assumption that I needed to force others to see things the way I saw them. This work, by contrast, acknowledged that every person had the inherent possibility to see beyond the immediate pressures, constraints, and opportunities of daily existence to the patterns that lay behind them. In other words, people can learn to see essence and potential and work together creatively to manifest them.

What a liberating thought! Transformation of the world lies hidden within the undeveloped capacity of every person. All that's needed are opportunities for us to develop ourselves, for us to learn to see things as they actually work so that change can flow from how we carry out our lives. This was my first intuition of the non-heroic journey. I didn't need to become something I wasn't in order to cause (or

force) other people to change. I needed to join with them, to care about the things they cared about, in order to help them create the change they were already seeking.

I understood this idea almost the minute I joined the Carmel group, and soon after I had my first opportunity to witness its real power in action. I joined a business team that was working with engineers at DuPont who were trying to figure out better ways to work with titanium dioxide. This was an expensive material to produce, in both ecological and economic terms. With the gentlest of means—dialogue, probing questions, and systemic frameworks that encouraged them to learn how to manage their own thinking processes—we were able to help this group of engineers gain profound insight into the properties of the material, insights that changed forever the way it was produced. Within a few months, we were able to end years of mountain and stream destruction in Australia, where titanium was mined.

The changes we helped create at DuPont were profound, even revolutionary. They led to a completely new and proprietary process that allowed the company to extract high grade titanium from small quantities of low grade ore. But the methods we used to achieve this breakthrough were non-heroic. We were simply helping people do their jobs better by educating their thinking. These were ordinary, well-meaning individuals, attempting to do their best with the tasks in front of them. By focusing on the ways they thought about how to carry out these tasks, we were able to help them transform an entire industry. They became change agents *from within* the roles they had chosen to play in their companies and communities.

This point may seem so obvious that one can easily miss its significance. For me, the evolution of society is a collective activity. It doesn't come from the heroic actions of one political or military genius or the entrepreneurial insights of a great business leader, although these make great subjects for the stories we tell. Rather, it comes from *waking up and developing millions of people to the systemic benefits that can flow from thinking better about how they play their chosen daily roles in society*. We make a better world by teaching ordinary people practices for shifting their thinking

processes and enabling themselves to show up as parents, employees, citizens, and neighbors in completely new ways.

Of course, this shift in mind is exactly what's needed to create successful families, businesses, civic organizations, and even governments. It's no accident that I spent many years working in business systems. I recognized early on that they offered excellent platforms for doing this transformational work. But really, my purpose all along was to help individuals develop greater consciousness and agency with regard to their own thinking, in order to allow far more beneficial actions to flow from it. For this reason, my earlier books focused almost entirely on businesses. This book looks at the other side of the same coin: what each of us can do in our own lives, through the many roles that we play at home, at work, and in the world. It's a personal book, and many of its stories are personal. But it's also a book about the fundamentals that are needed to create healthy economies and societies.

Personal Transformation at DuPont

One of the people who worked on DuPont's titanium project was a young engineer named Jimmy Stockbridge. His team was responsible for transforming titanium ore into titanium dioxide at the company's plant in DeLisle, Mississippi. Jimmy had come to DuPont straight out of graduate school and had a gift for motivating people. He was enthusiastic and energetic, and like a good general, he could transmit this enthusiasm to others.

But when I met him, Stockbridge was fiercely divided within himself. As a conscientious person, he wanted to do good in the world. He dedicated himself to environmental causes in his private life and to excellence at work, but he experienced these two sides of his life as conflicting with one another. So when we began to discover ways to use his work life to transform the environmental impacts of his industry, he was on fire and ready to rouse the troops and lead the charge.

Of course, this was a manifestation of his old heroic mode. It didn't take us long to help him realize that becoming an ecological advocate inside the company wasn't the point either, because this still meant promoting his own point of view rather than tapping into what was meaningful for his colleagues. He could see that the power of what we were doing lay in helping everyone use their own intelligence and conscientiousness to contribute to a better world. This insight completely transformed the way he worked as a manager, from motivational hero to resource.

The proprietary changes underway in DuPont's titanium refinement process required the radical redesign of the DeLisle plant in a very short time. Stockbridge discovered that it wasn't necessary or appropriate to be the hero supplying the enthusiasm that would motivate his team. Instead, we needed to help them develop new thinking capabilities that would enable them to recognize the significance of what they were doing—and therefore how to work differently. When they could see for themselves the importance of these changes for their industry, they were able to supply their own will and enthusiasm. Stockbridge had learned the difference between exhorting people and developing them—between being a white knight riding to the rescue and a co-learner holding the container within which everyone could grow.

Being Non-heroic

I introduce the idea of the non-heroic journey as an antidote to heroic psychology. Heroism is sometimes necessary in emergencies, but it is always counterproductive to making enduring change. The Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu wrote, "Water is fluid, soft, and yielding. But water will wear away rock, which is rigid and cannot yield. As a rule, whatever is fluid, soft, and yielding will overcome whatever is rigid and hard. . . . This is another paradox: what is soft is strong."¹

The non-heroic path is a journey. It comes from learning how to live one's life and play one's roles in ways that are designed to create change. It doesn't get turned on

with a surge of adrenaline and turned off again with a burst of over-the-top action. It is slow, steady, cumulative, and powerful, like water shaping rock. It depends on coming to know ourselves, understanding how our minds work, and learning to shape and direct creative energies.

Non-heroism happens in everyday life, with all of the imperfections and incompleteness that are simply part of being human. You don't need to sacrifice the things you love or give up the ordinary joys of having a job, family, and neighbors. Non-heroic undertakings need not be grandiose to make a profound difference. What they require is an ability to see how the work we are doing—*any* work we are doing—can play a critical role within society. Our effects can be direct, through the influence we have on social institutions, or indirect, by preparing others (for example, our children) to play their roles. When we understand our role, it becomes possible to work at the level of home, classroom, entrepreneurial business, or neighborhood to create the better society for which we all long.

Is The Regenerative Life for You?

When we ask children what they want to be when they grow up, none of them choose something small. They all want something meaningful or that serves a deep purpose. When we're young we have aspirational visions that are BIG, and we are sure that when we're adults, we'll finally have the wherewithal to enact them. Much of children's play is connected to big visions.

But these visions get lost along the way as we grow up. They feel too challenging. Why? Why is it that once we've gotten established in the world, we let go of them? For many young professionals, the problem isn't so much a loss of dreams and aspirations. Rather, it's a sense of despair, a belief that the world has been running backward for so long that there's no place for them to pursue their dreams. If you are struggling with how to make real meaning from your life and work, this book is intended to for you.

Work is where we put our life energy, and we tend to define our work in terms of career. Yet, this can be too narrow a way to frame our sense of what work is. Can we instead think of ourselves as pursuing particular roles in society, roles that at their core are meant to improve and transform the communities and industries we are part of? This transformational work is what lies behind those childhood aspirations to make meaningful contributions. Viewed from this perspective, our work isn't something we do to earn a livelihood while we make social contributions as volunteers on the side. Our work is directly connected to the contributions we aim to make. But this requires us to think deeply about what work is, what we bring to it, and how we do it.

The current generation has grown up with a worldview that understands certain core truths: we humans have to change the way we live on the planet and become participants in living systems; relationships are at least as important to a good life as material success; and work is a place where we can contribute to a better world. For this generation, the political and economic struggles that preoccupy their elders and absorb so much media attention are a sideshow that will be swept away by their emerging demographic power. They know that they will soon be living in a very different world and culture because they are already creating it. In other words, they are forming a collective image of what society's future purpose and form should be. This book is intended as a response to them. It lays out the key roles from which it will be possible to regenerate society.

How to Read *The Regenerative Life*

Use the frameworks. Every chapter in this book is organized around a living systems framework that is derived from close observation of how life works. I strongly encourage the adoption of these frameworks because they 1) enable us to better understand and work with complex phenomena and 2) allow us to manage the

complexity of our own minds. I mentioned earlier that a shift of mind is a powerful way to work on changing the world. Frameworks are the key to this shift.

I am not referring here to mental models, which are the rigid codes that govern our behavior and problem solving. The manners we learn from our parents, for example, represent an accepted code or pattern of conduct within particular contexts, such as how to behave at the dinner table. The power of mental models is that they readily become automatic and unconscious—they program us. But this is also their downside. A mental model inserts itself into our mental processes, presenting itself as our only natural or available option for dealing with a given situation. For this reason, we carry out automatic patterns of behavior—even when they are inappropriate or in violation of our values—without noticing that we’re doing so. (Think of the last time you told a lie to protect someone’s feelings, when you could just as well have *gently* asked a question, instead.)

Frameworks have precisely the opposite purpose. Instead of programming us, they break our programming. They encourage consciousness, systemic thought, and careful consideration of what is appropriate in a specific situation. Of course, they can only serve this purpose if we engage them in a conscious way. It can be all too easy to convert a living framework into a machine-like mental model.

I remember the moment when I finally realized how powerful a framework could be in my life. As a young woman, I never really thought of myself as a writer. I could generate a profusion of good ideas, but the discipline of organizing them so that other people could follow them was not, to put it mildly, my strong suit. In my early 40s, I had submitted a chapter for the book, *Learning Organizations*, in which I presented a characteristically contrarian point of view.² The editor came back to me, enthusiastic about the ideas in the article but at the same time deeply dismayed that she could not understand how they hung together. I went back to look at what I’d written, and I could see the underlying structure or framework it contained. Once I made this explicit, the article suddenly made sense. I vowed to never write anything

in the future without first articulating, at least to myself, the framework that supplied its coherence.

For me, frameworks provide a structure that can help me manage all of the different dimensions and complexities of whatever I'm working on. Instead of losing myself in the details, I'm able to hold a dynamic image in my mind of the relationships among different, sometimes competing ideas. This allows me to work with the details without ever losing my place in the big picture. It is to share these benefits that I offer the frameworks in this book. There are lots of interesting ideas and details to get lost in, but there is always an organizing structure to help you place them in context.

In particular, I've used a familiar framework to organize the core content of this book—the enneagram. I mention this because the enneagram has very much entered popular culture and in the process been downgraded to a typology, which is a mental model. Understood as a framework, the enneagram helps reveal the patterns of relationship and energy hidden within the dynamics of transformation. In this case, I'm using it to help us see how we can work together to transform society. The final chapter of the book is dedicated to an in-depth look at how the enneagram framework applies to this important work.

Take it personally. If we are to live regenerative lives—if we are to break old, unconscious patterns of belief and come at things in new, more conscious ways—then we must allow the ideas introduced in this book to enter and change us. Put in a slightly different way, we need to avoid approaching the material presented here as knowledge—as an improved mental model. Instead, we need to approach it as a question, a provocation, a challenge. *The Regenerative Life* won't be helpful if it's received as my ideas. It will only become helpful when it has been tested by your own lived experience.

For this reason, I suggest that you start a journal to record your impressions and experiences in parallel to your reading. Don't make notes about what I've written or your thoughts about it. Instead, make notes about what happened when you applied what you read to something meaningful in your life. What changed? What are you seeing differently? What could happen next to extend this learning?

You will notice that in many places I've illustrated my points with personal examples from my own life. I've also included stories from people who applied these concepts in their lives and what happened to them as a result. I'm hoping that by the time you come to the end, you'll be able to supply examples from your life as well!

Take it to work. Once we've begun to take these ideas personally, once we've committed in an ongoing way to disrupting our unconscious patterns, we're ready to apply what we've learned in all of our endeavors. Most of us begin by developing our roles within family and community, but it is important to bring our inner changes into the workplace, as well. Work is where we invest a large part of our time, energy, and creativity. Questions to ask yourself in this context are, "How do I shake loose of my job description, this mental model, imposed and maintained by others with my assent? Instead, how do I learn to see myself playing a living, evolving role that will make my company or organization more successful at fulfilling its purpose?"

Reflecting on these questions can help us unleash our creative energies and put them to use toward a meaningful purpose. But they become even more relevant for those of us who are in the role of managers or leaders. From the perspective of a regenerative life, the work of a manager is not to tell other people what to do, but to help them develop and utilize their own intelligence and energy in service to the larger goals and missions of the organization.

¹ John Heider, *The Tao of Leadership: Lao-Tzu's Tao Te Ching Adapted for a New Age* (Atlanta, Georgia: Humanics Publishing Group, 1997).

² Sarita Chawla and John Renesch, editors, *Learning Organizations: Developing Cultures for Tomorrow's Workplace* (New York: Productivity Press, 1995).