

CULTIVATING COMMUNITY CAPACITY WITH FOUR “DEEP WISDOM” PRACTICES

April 2020 Update of May 2014 reflections by Susan Stuart Clark, Executive Director, Common Knowledge and now also co-founder at Sense-Us.org

Angeles Arrien was a cross-cultural pioneer and mentor to thousands. Her seminal book [Four Fold Way: Walking the Paths of the Warrior, Teacher, Healer and Visionary](#) was published in 1993. This time-tested cross-cultural framework provides four elemental practices that have helped guide my learning journey about the habits of healthy communities. Angeles passed away on April 24th, 2014 and has been deeply missed. The anniversary of her passing calls me to contemplate how what I have learned and applied could be of service as we look ahead not just to immediate recovery but the bigger opportunity for community transformation.



Right now, we are celebrating the first responders and health providers who are saving lives and the often underappreciated people providing essential services for those who can shelter in place. We are also seeing widespread need to connect more deeply when physically distanced and a superbloom of creative approaches to cultivating community. What can we do to support people’s ability to embrace new insights about how much we need each other as well as the hard evidence of the ways our society and communities have been weakened to the point of failure? To have “grateful seeing” about what we have, while understanding the waves of fear and anxiety that swirl in and around us?

The four practices identified by Angeles Arrien – an integration from indigenous cultures across the world – can be a resource to help us replenish ourselves and help us connect with our deeper selves and wisdom. In turn, we can apply these practices to creating the conditions that help community members make clearer sense together of longstanding complex challenges as well as some startling new opportunities. Even in the midst of the current loss of lives and livelihood, there is a concurrent readiness among many for new ways of seeing our collective capacity. To make sure such significant losses have not been not in vain, let’s start now to co-imagine and begin co-generating a more inclusive, abundant and sustainable future.

1) SHOW UP AND CHOOSE TO BE PRESENT – The Way of the Warrior

This moment asks us to wake up and be present to what is happening. In any circumstance, it requires great intention to bring more than our distracted multi-tasking selves or just our professional identity. Now, we are confronting such dynamic challenges without enough information to support our usual ways of coping, This is the time to acknowledge that our true power shows up when we come forward with our whole selves – connected to our breath, body and heart.

We each have a role to play in bringing forth a better future. We may be seduced by a storyline that someone else will fix the situation for us – but underneath that is a hunger to be of use and to know what is

ours to do. We are being called to show up with all of ourselves, the wounds and fears and heartaches as well as the strengths we claim and the talents we've hidden.

Being present also means being aware of how we are responding to circumstances. With greater mindfulness, we increase our powers of observation and reduce our reactivity. People who are present are not just reacting to stimulus but developing an array of skillful responses to adapt to changing conditions. As Victor Frankl explains: "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom." By being present, we help ourselves and each other develop our "response-ability" to the situation in front of us.

Facilitator Practices: To help the community members you work with increase their ability to be present:

- Frame the engagement experience as a dialogue and opportunity to learn from each other, rather than a debate to persuade each other. Provide guidelines for the conversation that support a stance of curiosity that helps people practice their listening skills.
- Allow people to share what they bring into the room early in any convening. Many people cannot be present to each other until they have paused and had a chance to take a deep breath together and release or share their initial thoughts. Some brief way of engaging people at 5 or 10 minutes into a meeting will dramatically increase their energy and ability to "arrive fully" and stay present.
- Use formats that let people take care of and honor their bodies. When we are able to meet in person, avoid auditorium sardine style seating. Where possible, incorporate natural light, movement and the presence of nature. Even in this time of meeting virtually, plan for breaks or pauses where people can go outside for a brief reflection.
- Any good engagement process helps people to develop a fuller understanding of:
 - a) The Situation – getting past reductionist, binary thinking; instead, invite people to consider the history, ambiguities, tensions and possibilities in the circumstances
 - b) Who the "Other" is – by exchanging stories and what we each value, we feel the human in each other; starting with aspects of what we have in common creates better conditions for exploring and respecting the very important differences
 - c) The Participant's Own Role – helping community members learn about and reflect on what they can do inspires a sense of greater agency and shared responsibility
- If you provide an experience that trusts people to make sense and meaning together, rather than your tightly steering them toward a conclusion, more will be shared for the benefit of the whole.

2) PAY ATTENTION TO WHAT HAS HEART AND MEANING – The Way of the Healer

Many of the workplace leaders and public officials I work with have been trained to be suspicious of emotion. If one only hears outbursts of frustration, that feeds a perception that emotion is unhelpful and "unprofessional." But listening for and understanding what has heart and meaning for a group or community provides the single most important clue to the essential energy that supports or blocks a path forward. Rather than being "superfluous," what has deep meaning is essential information to understand our present situations.

We can pay attention to how we respond to the stories we tell ourselves and common narratives passed on in our culture. Which lift us up? Which make us feel “called to the occasion” of our larger destiny? Which ones leave us feeling depleted? Left out? Angry? The more we connect with our own interior and the interior of those around us, the more effective we are as facilitators. In most community settings, participants read our hearts rather than our facts to decide if they trust us. Let’s honor our right brains as well as left brains, our intuitive ways of knowing as well as our rational minds, our hearts as well as heads.

Facilitator Practices: To help the community members you work with increase *their* ability to pay attention to what has heart and meaning:

- Begin with ice breakers or opening questions that let people share what they are currently experiencing or feeling. You might choose to use storytelling and other narrative or creative devices to help people connect with their hearts as well as minds.
- Use dialogue guidelines that create explicit space for people to discover the “heart of the matter.”
- Invite people to jointly define what they value – helping them discover and name the common ground that they share.
- Start with less data, aiming for “just enough” to get the conversation going; too much data too soon can lead to overwhelm, clouding people’s ability to connect with the issue and reducing trust.
- You can listen for what has heart and meaning early in a process – or find yourself still working with its hidden impacts later in the process. It’s best to stay in touch with the changing flow of what has heart and meaning *throughout* the process.

3) TELL THE TRUTH WITHOUT BLAME OR JUDGMENT – The Way of the Visionary

This practice is needed more than ever. Our current media and political systems might lead us to buy into the cynical view that we live in a post-fact society. Yet, there are absolutely real conditions that affect some or all of us, such as who is or isn’t able to get health care, what wages are paid for what kinds of jobs, levels of food insecurity or trends in air quality. We often hear challenges as problems that need to be solved by “others.” We may be quick to assign blame when responses fall short and have narrow understanding about the history and sources of the problem. Instead, we can help people look at multi-dimensional situations as objectively as possible and outline the systemic factors, current barriers as well as bright spots and opportunities. We can all listen better if we are not hearing a story that we need to “defend against” – or that makes us feel pressured into acting alone to “save” something. If we feel secure in our “enoughness,” we no longer need to tell stories that slant the facts to save face. There is a fundamental relief in speaking truth.

Facilitator Practices – To help the community members you work with increase *their* ability to tell and hear the truth without blame or judgment:

- As the neutral host or facilitator, practice nonjudgmental listening that provides each participant with the experience of knowing that they were truly heard. This also models high quality listening skills for the group.
- Use neutral framings to invite joint discovery on an issue. Ask people to come with curiosity rather than advocacy.

- Use facilitation guidelines that invite “I” statements and discourage people speaking on behalf of others. Ask who else should be in the room if diverse representative cross section of the community is not present.
- For many community dialogues, there are a few “strategic facts” that help undermine prevalent misinformation or stereotypes. For example, when discussing poverty, many people have preconceptions. Sharing data about the percentage of full-time workers who are still unable to afford housing, for example, can help participants reevaluate their views.
- Invite people to use the lens of “appreciative inquiry.” Rather than starting in the familiar mode of problem solving, ask people to first consider what is working in a given situation. Let people express hopes alongside concerns.
- Invite participants to think of examples in their lives where they have told the truth without blame or judgment. Encourage them to be discerning consumers and honest conveyors of information.

4) BE OPEN, NOT ATTACHED, TO OUTCOME – The Way of the Teacher

Our most positive path forward is going to be a co-creation that is informed by our mutual vision and intention. We may have a particular idea of what a better situation or better society would look like. As facilitators, we must remain open to the ideas of others, creating space for people to imagine their own visions for the future. Because the extent of the issues facing our communities and society can be vast and multi-dimensional, we cannot know all of the relevant dimensions and what needs to come forth. Being unattached to outcome does not mean that we don’t care. Instead it means that we have come to trust that there are additional perspectives, deeper insights and unexpressed energy and resources waiting to be invited to bloom. We can be informed – and often delighted -- by what appears.

Facilitator Practices – To help the community members you work with increase *their* ability to be open, but not attached, to outcome:

- Create an engagement process that is inclusive and transparent, so that people are more likely to trust what comes out of it.
- Frame the dialogue within a larger context of shared values. Help people see that what “has heart and meaning” for them is being addressed, even if a particular decision is not what they expected.
- Honor people’s concerns as valuable contributions to understanding the situation. Use curiosity to clarify the underlying needs that are being expressed.
- Be willing as a facilitator to adjust the process if it serves the intention of the group.
- Engage people as early as possible in a community process, rather than waiting until you are at the point of a decision that will only create “winners and losers.” Instead, honor people’s commitment to an issue, using their energy as a resource, no matter which direction the process takes.

Whenever I approach an inflection point in my personal as well as professional life, I return to these four practices. Now, with an unprecedented global pandemic forcing us all into the unknown together, it is no longer a case of relying on maps of the known world but instead having faith in what we are capable of when we cultivate the co-generative power of a community aligned around common purpose. Let’s use deep wisdom to co-create a future worthy of the next generation.