

Applying Future Search to National Poverty: A Healing Process

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The Future Search method is a healing process. It brings diverse people together to discover that they live in the same world and worry about the same things, understand their differences, take responsibility for themselves, find shared meaning and aspirations for the future, and make commitments that will help the whole create the future it envisions. By working directly with people who have different experiences, knowledge, needs, and information within a process that validates all perspectives and uses differences as information, not as problems, people experience a shift in their fundamental understanding of “what is” and their own place within it. Experiencing this kind of perceptual shift is common in all healing, and becomes the basis for new, healthier ways to handle the situation at hand, whatever it may be.

By using this healing process across the country and focusing it on poverty, I believe it will heal individuals, communities, and the nation of long-standing mental, emotional, and spiritual wounds, which now need to be healed for the good of us all. It is a way back to wholeness, which we are all seeking. It is a way back to unity by finding our common ground, back to empathy by exploring our common fears and suffering, back to hope by uncovering our shared aspirations for the future, and back to our shared humanity by implementing plans we ourselves created from having done so. It is a way to connect with each other on our ultimate common ground—as children of God—to create a world in which our differences are known simply as avenues for us to experience more of the whole than we would otherwise be able to. These are things we’ve lost or forgotten and it is time to find them and remember. Doing so can only bring good things to all of us. For these reasons, this work is healing work.

Most of the solutions to poverty we’ve grappled with as a society focus on the external world, which is only the manifestation of our inner worlds. Nothing happens externally that was not first born as a thought, and we’re the only ones here having them, so we must acknowledge that we’re the ones creating the world we live in. The question is: Is this what we want? Do we want all that comes as a result of poverty? I believe if we asked the whole nation this last question, we would find vast agreement—among the rich and the poor, the bureaucrat and the advocate, the employed and the unemployed, the young and the old, the conservative and the liberal, the black, white, yellow, and red, the professional and the layperson. This represents powerful common ground from which we could start if we could simply resist our tendency to begin from a position of conflict about our differences. When we focus first (and sometimes exclusively) on our differences, and think of them as problems or obstacles rather than information that will help us, we deny ourselves the opportunity to find common ground upon which lasting solutions are discovered. In our inner worlds, we have isolated ourselves from the problem and each other—it feels safer to us that way. As long as we isolate ourselves from the problem, we isolate ourselves from the solution, and therefore have no right to complain about how the ripple effects of poverty affect us.

So, although our external interventions may be necessary, they are not sufficient. To attempt to fix on the outside that which is born in thought on the inside is a self-defeating endeavor, so long as what we continue to think about poverty points us in the direction of keeping it in place. As long as we—individually or collectively—feel that poverty is someone else’s problem, feel anger toward those living in poverty or toward those that we feel are responsible for “fixing” it, feel overwhelmed by and hide behind the complexity of the problem, and focus our energy

exclusively on the differences we have, it gives power to the very things we don't want to remain in place. What we focus on, we get. If we focus on an individual's or institution's ineptness or irresponsibility, we will be rewarded by ineptness and irresponsibility, and we ourselves are affected by it. If we focus on fighting something or someone, we will be rewarded by having that someone fight back, as well as many more opportunities to fight. This defeats our whole purpose for starting the fight in the first place; we started it so that we could resolve something, but we end up spending more energy on the fighting than we do on finding the solutions we so desperately want. The result for us is that we now have two problems—the original one and the one created by the fight. At best, this is a colossal waste of energy. At worst, it does harm to ourselves and others by way of anger, stress, and dis-ease that perpetual conflict creates. Somewhere in between, using fighting and adversarial approaches to create caring behaviors in others is just garden-variety hypocrisy. It would be one thing if we could get the results we seek by ourselves—we'd just do it. But, as long as we need others to get those results, it does us absolutely no good to ask for their help by throwing a punch. To think everything would be okay if only "those other people" would just get their act together is to forget that we are all "other people" to someone. When we're all demanding from each other answers that no one has individually, it isn't surprising that we feel angry and helpless—angry at them for not having the answers, and helpless because we don't, either.

On the practical level, whatever gains we might make with our well-meaning external interventions will be repeatedly subsumed by the power of these and other thoughts that keep poverty in place. We may succeed in raising the minimum wage, but if we continue to think that minimum wage jobs and the people who hold them are not valuable, we will leave in place other societal structures that sustain poverty. We may succeed in helping those living in poverty understand their responsibility in making their own way, but if we continue to think they alone can address the systemic and structural contributors to poverty, we are still only addressing part of the problem. We may be successful in our individual strategies, whatever they may be, but if we continue to think we can solve a systemic problem using singular, separate approaches (no matter how good they are), we will continue to do lots of noble work without seeing the kind of progress that work intends. In other words, unless we change our fundamental thoughts about poverty on a national scale, we will be perpetually running on the treadmill of progress—expending huge amounts of energy and money to ultimately go nowhere. Changing our fundamental beliefs from which our strategies are born will not only create new strategies, but it will also help create commitment to some of the individual strategies we've been working so hard to make work; it will give them the support they need to finally take hold.

Changing thoughts and the more embedded ones we call beliefs require an experience or set of experiences strong enough to dislodge our current beliefs. Sometimes this takes a long time. Sometimes it happens in an instant. Many times, the change happens somewhere in between. Most of us have experienced this continuum in our own lives, when our own minds were being changed or when we've seen other people's minds changed. Though a law may have us "fake it 'til we make it," being told to change our minds may make us change our outward behavior, it usually creates sufficient power to change our beliefs only after we've "faked it" long enough to make it rote. We can certainly tell someone or an institution that they are affected by poverty, that they have a role in the problem and in the solution, and that they and everyone would benefit from its solution. We can write about it, support our positions with data, politicize it, and speak with passionate conviction, but it is unlikely to change many minds. Because it is impossible for any of us individually to experience what it's like to have the experience, knowledge, needs, background, or influence of the whole, the closest we can come to such an experience is to have the whole system in the same room—supported by a neutral, empowering process—actively working as a whole to map our shared history, interconnectedness,

differences, shared fears and aspirations, and to tap into our individual and collective capacity to create a future better than the one we will have if we do nothing different. This experience happens in a Future Search session.

Though there are many examples of convening diverse groups around complex, high conflict issues, we never seem to stick with it long enough to get past our differences—where common ground is waiting—and on to the task of collaborative planning and action. Future Search's main goal is to keep the group whole long enough to get past its differences. We experience for ourselves that our own experience is significantly limited when compared to the whole. We hear, feel, see, and create things in a Future Search that we would have no way of experiencing in our isolated or adversarial environments. This is where the true magic begins—when we've identified, validated, and acknowledged our differences, and in so doing, have also exposed our common ground, we find that we are now motivated to work together to create a future that benefits all involved. We consciously and publicly acknowledge our differences, and we either use them to help us frame what we'd like to act upon or we literally put them aside. When we put them aside, we do so knowing we don't have enough support or energy for these ideas to create the kind of commitment needed to move forward on them. By neither denying or invalidating these differences, they serve as boundaries to what we can hope to achieve together, but they do not divide us. At this point, just acknowledging and documenting our differences without having to defend them helps us more clearly focus our action planning on only those things we agree on. It is comforting to know we aren't wasting our time planning action for things that have little support and therefore little chance of success. From here, it is quite energizing to move into the action planning segment of the Future Search experience. People from multiple stakeholder groups who have the most energy for a particular planning goal work together to flesh out its action components, and often these cross-functional groups create ongoing task forces who are responsible for the plan's implementation in the community. Since people rarely resist plans they make themselves, implementation and follow through are among the many benefits the Future Search experience brings that other approaches do not. How many times have we used approaches that produce perfectly rational plans that no one wants to or can implement?

Using Future Search as an experience- and action-based mechanism to change our thoughts and beliefs about poverty and to create new plans for addressing it may not ultimately get us all the way home, either. But I believe the chances are infinitely better when we engage the whole system in solving a whole-system problem than when we attempt it from our individual corners of the universe. When we allow, validate, and inventory all voices, experiences, knowledge, needs, and information, we have vastly more information to work with than any discrete part of the system could possibly have. When we are all involved in developing the plans that we ourselves will act upon, we create stronger commitment than any "outside expert" could ever produce. At the very least, we will gather together in rooms across the country with the goal of creating more prosperous conditions for us all, and it will get us closer to that goal, whether in terms of material things or spirit. From the financial and moral perspective, our country cannot afford to remain on the treadmill any longer and from the spiritual perspective, our individual and collective psyches can no longer reconcile the gap between what we all want—peace, love, and abundance, and what we create—war, hate, and poverty. This work is healing work.