PASCAL International Observatory - EcCoWell 2
Community Recovery Program

Briefing Paper 4

Engaging a "Dream Deferred": Arts, Spirituality and Transformative Learning in an EcCoWell2 Learning Neighbourhood Approach

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Integrating Arts, Spirituality and Transformative Learning towards Wellbeing

- This paper captures opportunities and challenges of how an expanded understanding of EcCoWell has practical implications for community recovery and renewal and engaging a "dream deferred"
- Arts, spirituality and transformative learning integrated into a holistic EcCoWell 2 learning neighbourhood approach can contribute to the work of building a resilient, sustainable and hopeful future
- Examples of a comparative case study in Philadelphia and New York City and the Walls-Ortiz Gallery and Center in Harlem (NYC) point to the significance of a broader, more global understanding of wellbeing that includes emotive, embodied, artistic and spiritual aspects
- Happiness and thriving within spiritual praxis are not the same, but can both be helpful to frame a process of transformative learning towards resiliency

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What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

And so it has.

In the United States, the implications of the persistent, yet unmanageable COVID-19 pandemic, an uncertain global economy, questionable national leadership, and a legacy of pervasive racism and systemic injustice have led to the nightly rhythm of protest (and until very recently, fireworks) in cities across the nation, at times peaceful, and at other times erupting in violence. Individually and collectively as a society, we are grappling with a "new normal" in our homes, schools, places of worship, businesses, public spaces and communities. Climate change is leading to unexpected and less predictable weather patterns, the global population is ageing and we are encountering a host of new questions and adaptive challenges (Kearns, 2020).

Timely and relevant, this paper argues for the need to respond in part with the intentional integration of the arts, spirituality / faith, and transformative learning in an evolving EcCoWell 2 learning neighbourhood framework. It imagines what resilience and recovery might look like in a post-coronavirus world with an expanded set of lenses. While the optics are not necessarily new, they attend to the urgency of consciousness-raising and location of critical spaces where formal, informal and nonformal learning can happen with our whole beings present; also wherein lie the opportunities and challenges of transformational lifelong learning in neighbourhoods and cities for a just, sustainable, and hopeful future - a dream brought to fruition.

Building on previous briefs in this series, this paper aims to expand the consideration of wellbeing, mental health, ageing and the environment to the roles that the arts, spirituality / faith and transformative learning play in the process of post-pandemic community resilience and renewal. What is constant is change, and what is necessary is an agile, flexible approach to lifelong learning that encompasses priorities that recognize polycentric realities, one that is much broader and inclusive of multiple ways of seeing and understanding the world. What conditions must be in place to cultivate and bring the dream to reality? Or will it "dry up...fester...stink...or sag...like a heavy load" (Hughes, 1998)?

As Kearns aptly put it, "traditional ways will no longer do" (2020: 1). What then are the implications for policy and practice for an EcCoWell 2 Community Recovery process and program that recognizes this moment of reckoning and possibility? How do we iterate this approach wisely in supporting the resilience of communities in a time of extraordinary challenge and opportunity?

Background

Raymer (2019: 188) suggests that "learning and knowledge are indispensable to sustainability". As such, the kind of learning and knowledge necessary for resilience and wellbeing is not merely rational and logical, but also emotive, artistic, embodied and spiritual. Further, who decides whose knowledge is valued? Where and how does learning happen?

Transformative learning understood here is cosmological and integral in its expression. It involves:

> experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our way of being in the world. Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-locations; our relationships with other humans and with the natural world; our understanding of relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race and gender; our body awarenesses; our visions of alternative approaches to living; and our sense of possibilities for social justice and peace and personal joy. (O'Sullivan, 2002)

If anything, the coronavirus pandemic has challenged the illusion of control we have over our lives. While some leaders attempt to make informed decisions from data and science, others fumble with less precision. However, bluntly put, we simply do not know what we don't know. And it has taken a public health crisis of this scale to push us as a global society to question what has become "normal". What paradigms and structures have we come to accept as legitimate actually reflect "a dream deferred"? Rather than recover what has been "lost," we have an opportunity instead to reimagine what "normal" can and should be. Deep, transformative change is necessary. Do we dare to dream anew?

Months ago, when production halted, streets were empty, and millions sheltered in place, blue skies re-emerged. Tall grass grew once again. Now, in the milieu of re-openings here and hot spots of new infections emerging there, how can we rebuild towards a sustainable, not a disposable, future? Dare we move away from a universalistic, materialistic, Western hegemonic paradigm built on Enlightenment principles that value the "shoulders up" and instead consider more pluriversal literacies and possibilities that are inclusive of multiple ways of knowing and being (Perry, 2020)? In framing learning outcomes and measuring the success of UN SDGs, with what scales can we recognize alternative literacies and assess improved quality of life (UN, 2016)? How can structures and systems which privilege the few and those with power be resisted and deconstructed in order to provide a counter-narrative to linear development, and expand what is legitimate knowledge and evidence of wellbeing?

Kearns (2018) looks at happiness and wellbeing from the standpoint of the World Happiness Reports (WHR) which link low levels of happiness with poverty and disadvantage. Meaning and purpose are connected to wellbeing and a mindful learning culture, an aspiration included in the *2017 UNESCO Cork Call to Action*:

> We aspire to build mindful learning cultures in our cities that foster global consciousness and citizenship through local action to implement the SDGs (UIL, 2017).

Kearns further highlights Emily Smith's book *The Power of Meaning*, identifying four pillars of meaning: belonging, purpose, storytelling, and transcendence (Smith, 2017: 41). These are all well-intended measures of meaning and purpose.

However, the framework of happiness as wellbeing is not necessarily the same as thriving or flourishing within spiritual praxis. Practices such as lament, worship and waiting are tools for spiritual and faith communities to process and persevere through oppression; this is not about pleasure and gratification. Instead this focus builds on the science of positive psychology, and allows for another reality of experience where the light that may shine brightest is the one in darkness. Williams (2020) describes that prayer, journaling, meditation, and participating in traditional ceremonies are also ways to help people get through challenges and bring peace and clarity to their lives.

Meaning and purpose gained through suffering point to resilience in communities of a different quality. A "dream deferred" can end in an explosion, but it can also fuel a sobering hope for the future. The gospel songs of the civil rights movement echo a spirituality not formed in happiness but in hope with an upside-down logic in the midst of trouble. In the face of a global pandemic that has upended much of what was known as "normal," glaring inequality and injustices have been uncovered, and systems held as legitimate and powerful - particularly those that benefit the few at the cost of the many - have been resisted and shaken. As EcCoWell 2 principles are tested in this moment, a prismatic lens of robust spirituality, embodied and artistic expression, and transformative learning can contribute to wellbeing and resilience, another path towards a sustainable post COVID-19 world.
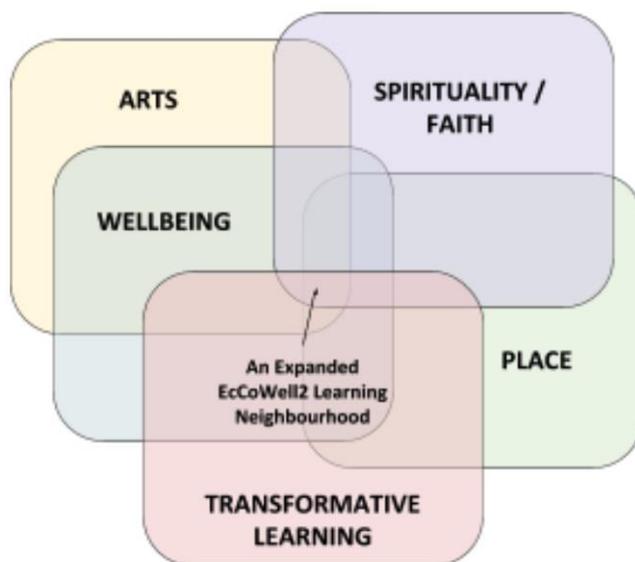
Figure 1. The integration of arts, wellbeing, spirituality / faith, place and transformative learning in an expanded understanding of the EcCoWell2 Learning Neighbourhood Framework

Figure 1 above depicts overlapping aspects of an expanded EcCoWell 2 construct, which incorporates the arts, spirituality / faith and transformative learning as well as wellbeing and place. It shows the convergence of spiritual realities and practices alongside embodied artistic expression, grounded in local context (place) for the thriving (holistic wellbeing) of communities where transformation of oppressive structures and systems might be redirected towards justice, hope and wholeness.

Tisdell and Tolliver (2003) provide a helpful way of understanding spirituality, comprising seven components:

1. a connection to a life force or higher self or purpose
2. a context that may or may not be related to a religious tradition
3. a sense of wholeness, healing, and the interconnectedness of all things
4. meaning making
5. knowledge construction through largely unconscious and symbolic processes (image, symbol, ritual, art, and music) that are deeply cultural
6. spiritual experiences that often happen by surprise
7. the ongoing development of identity (including one's cultural identity), of moving toward greater authenticity

While Maria has been grounded in a Christian faith tradition and spiritual practices that shape her way of understanding and being in the world (in teaching, learning as well as scholarship), Connie subscribes to a more eclectic approach to spirituality, less aligned with one particular religion than

open to possibilities of goodness and wholeness. Nonetheless, even more so in a pandemic reality, where physical presence is limited to virtual contact or social distancing guidelines, "spiritual practices can help connect us with our unconscious process and make explicit our inner values and beliefs explicit to others and ourselves so that deep and meaningful conversations can be had" (Diversity Divas, 2012: 744).

Transcending what can often be purely cognitive communication (privileging a rational Enlightenment mode of thinking) and thereby limited discussion, there is an opportunity to counter misunderstanding and ignorance of deeper inner feelings. Through spiritual practices such as music, worship, community celebration, hospitality, metaphor, and art, embodied "habits of being" and "ways of knowing" can be brought to the surface to create shared understanding (Diversity Divas, 2012: 744).

In critical times, we often see political, business, academic, and spiritual leaders come together with activists and citizens. This was true for the civil rights movement. We are reminded of this with the recent passing of United States Congressman John Lewis, who played a pivotal role then and now. We are seeing some of this happen again with the pandemic and protests. One of the strengths of a "learning city" framework is the notion that *together* as a community, we have more potential to make positive and meaningful change. This means city planners working with educators, citizens, nonprofits, faith communities and business leaders to learn about the local community and use their collective knowledge and experience to solve problems and promote social justice.

The arts also play a critical role in mediating the experience of living and learning in dense, diverse urban areas. Through expressive ways of knowing and being, they "help...people to understand their own place in society and the city, to understand difference, and to appreciate it. It doesn't remove the tensions but it can much of the time turn them into something else, something more engaged and productive" (Crossick, 2013: 29). Further, Gyan Prakash writes "art is not just produced by the global city; it is also integral to its very existence, to the way we experience the city and our own life within it" (Prakash & Kruse, 2008). Thus, the integration of robust spiritual practices finding their way in embodied artistic expression in a lifelong learning, place-based context has potential to foster transformative learning for thriving in communities, and to cultivate the dream.

What has been missing from earlier EcCoWell discourse is this very connection between spirituality / faith and the arts in the overall wellbeing of individuals and communities. Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and even more recent Nobel Prize winner Malala Yousafzai, were all committed to their spiritual practice as well as leaders of social change. By making these deeper connections between faith / spirituality, consciousness-raising, and learning cities, a more holistic, engaged, and local approach to the work of social justice and equity can bear fruit for generations to come.

EcCoWell 2: An evolving approach

Boshier (2018) observes that "learning city" can be read as both a noun and a verb, a place and a process. If this is so, how can the city, at the level of neighbourhood and individual, transform or be transformed? How can we - denizens and/or visitors - read the city, its complexity and its tendency to change and adapt? How do we learn the vocabulary of the street and find the pulse of a city alive? How does this dual understanding open our eyes, bodies and spirits to even more?
When adult learners engage in deep learning about their community, they have the potential to more fully investigate complex social systems and reflect on human behavior mitigated by the macro environment. This level of understanding is needed in families, neighbourhoods, and cities in order to address complex problems such as violence poverty, homelessness, and foster stronger education and growth. Promoting social justice, enhancing quality of life, and building cohesive cities and neighbourhoods through collaborative efforts with citizens, community leaders, and local and regional

governments are key elements of a "learning city" framework; this is even more so at the scale of the neighbourhood (Kearns, 2012, 2020; Watson & Tiu Wu, 2015).

The EcCoWell approach, developed in 2012 by Peter Kearns, seeks to integrate strands of city development into a more holistic approach to learning cities and more specifically, learning neighbourhoods. It initially brought together ecology and economy (Ec), community and culture (Co), wellbeing and lifelong learning (Well) for the holistic improvement of quality of life, focusing on citizenship, families and neighbourhoods. In 2017, EcCoWell was broadened to include happiness and entrepreneurship as core principles.

The EcCoWell 2 development is finding expression in localities in Asia, North America, Africa and other parts of Europe - as seen by the participant list in the EcCoWell 2 Community Recovery Program. While this is encouraging, there is still a need to reframe the metrics built on an economic paradigm calculating "success" through GDP. Argued earlier, the benefits of learning cities include more empowered citizens, improved social cohesion, increased economic and cultural prosperity, and more sustainable development (UIL, 2013); however, can "learning city" per Boshier (2018) also mean reading its spiritual life and capacity? How can an expanded notion of spiritual, artistic and embodied literacies strengthen the EcCoWell 2 approach, particularly if wellbeing is understood as happiness as well as thriving in body, mind and soul? Keeping this in mind, the following section briefly traces the authors' involvement in EcCoWell 2 development as evidence for iterations of this approach in practice.

PASCAL 2016 (Glasgow, Scotland): Comparative Study of New York and Philadelphia

While the first implementation of EcCoWell principles was in 2012 in Cork, Ireland, we (the authors) came to know about the approach a few years later as we searched for a way to understand our work as educators and scholars, working with adult learners using experiential, place-based pedagogies to foster transformative learning in our respective cities. Despite our different contexts - Maria worked at City Seminary of New York, an urban Christian theological learning community in Harlem (NY) and Connie taught at the Community College of Philadelphia (PA) - we found that integration of experiential teaching and learning, spirituality, and consciousness-raising in local neighbourhood contexts led to greater intentionality and creativity in fostering transformative lifelong learning and improved quality of life for citizens.

In a presentation at the PASCAL 2016 conference in Glasgow, we discussed how the city was used as a classroom. We were "learning city." Two groups of students with similarly diverse demographics were led through parallel learning experiences in their respective cities over a four-month period. One group was composed of participants in an urban ministry certificate program, while the other group took a community college Community Leadership class. Each group spent time in city neighbourhoods that were familiar and unfamiliar, making observations, collecting data, experiencing the space, and engaging in various levels of interaction with community members.

Using journal entries, online surveys, and reflection papers, emergent themes were drawn out regarding transformative learning and the impact of place-based pedagogy. Similar themes emerged from the classes. They included: social justice; unity, collaboration and healing; love (self, other, place); education leading to change; growth through shared experience; and significance of spirituality or consciousness-raising.

As educators, we saw the local neighbourhood as part of our learning lab, encouraged self-reflection and built community amongst learners, with the common goal for students to engage with the neighbourhood and challenge themselves to be part of positive community growth. In this process,

students deepened their cross-cultural understanding and consciousness of the work towards justice.

But we also learned that structural and system change and human development need to occur in order to build "learning cities." Inequality is more deeply understood when directly experienced with all five senses, when personal stories are shared--allowing voices to be heard, and when there is time for reflection and dialogue. Data increases one's understanding of the issue at hand, and helps develop goals and actionable strategies, but love and compassion are powerful instruments of change. They build hope, enable self-esteem, create trust, and develop community. Spirituality and/or consciousness raising happen at multiple levels, and each person has his /her own unique journey. It is our faith, love, and hope in each other, the world, and a higher power that allow us to sustain our dreams and pick ourselves up and try again and again to make progress. Thus, in difficult times we need every human tool necessary to lift our spirits so we can have the energy needed to engage in sustained action for change.

PASCAL 2017 (Pretoria, South Africa): Arts, Spirituality and Place at the Walls-Ortiz Gallery (Harlem)

Building on this initial work, Maria embarked with a colleague, Sarah Gerth van den Berg, in a consideration of how faith / spirituality and the arts play a mediating role in transformative, lifelong learning in a dense, diverse urban context: the Walls-Ortiz Gallery and Center (WOGC) in Harlem. The Walls-Ortiz Gallery is the arts and research space of City Seminary of New York, an intercultural Christian theological learning community. The gallery serves as a "third space" where conversation and arts-based activities are facilitated through the spiritual practice of hospitality aimed at improving the liveability of cities at a local scale, and promoting social change through the learning that happens at individual, group, and institutional levels (Jarvis, 2007).

In the spring of 2017, Maria and a team of gallery staff and community members facilitated a two-month community arts installation, "How Does our Garden Grow?." The project analysis was shared at the PASCAL 2017 conference. The presentation aimed to explore the possibilities and contributions of a spirituality- and arts-based urban institution for lifelong learning and sustainable urban development. This was done through collecting and analyzing the art produced by visitors to the gallery, visitor feedback forms, notes and audio recording of installation planning group meetings, public engagement reflections by seminary staff, anecdotal experiences recorded in the authors' journal records, and a survey of the literature on urban space, art, and spirituality (*Figure 2*).

Figure 2. A Collage of Visual Materials for Analysis (Gerth van den Berg, 2020)

Maria and Sarah sought to understand the everyday experiences of urbanization and its effects on wellbeing; therefore, they focused on data capturing sensory, affective, and material dimensions of our own and others' understandings of place as it is constituted through physical locations, social relationships, historical memories, and future imaginings. Art-making and visual data provided access to those understandings (Rose, 2001; Pink, 2008).

Themes that emerged included:

1. Healing and transformation occurred at the individual, group, and community levels: creating productive tensions and appreciation of differences;
2. A "safe space" was created for visitors, especially families and those with special needs;
3. Spaces were transformed by visitor-driven engagement and intentionality;
4. Community relationships (self + city) were strengthened and the gallery became a meeting space for intergenerational learning; and
5. A platform was established for giving (eg. donations from the community).

Implications of the study were the potential for collaboration at the neighbourhood level with university, civic partners, and the broader community. The WOGC was a model for how faith-based and educational institutions could contribute to the happiness and wellbeing of the people in their communities through lifelong learning, particularly in communities facing the challenges of urbanization and change. What emerged also was the centrality of the arts as a dimension and expression of spirituality in the process of sustainable urban development. Further, this project was an example of leveraging individual and institutional resources in learning cities development for greater access to art, equity, and inclusivity. Finally, place-based arts social practice had the potential to create space for productive tensions, appreciation of difference, and increased understanding of self and city.

Local and Global Dialogue: Walls-Ortiz Gallery as an integrated model of faith, arts and spirituality in a transformative EcCoWell2 Learning neighbourhood and beyond

Since these initial projects, the focus for Maria's work has been at the local level, expanding the EcCoWell 2 approach to understand the Walls-Ortiz Gallery model of partnership in the local neighbourhood - particularly with the recent Justice Seedbed Project and community craftivism (Gerth van den Berg & Liu Wong, 2020). At a global scale, the WOGC is part of the EcCoWell 2 Community Recovery Program - sharing lessons learned with others in the network, as well as a co-host of the [PASCAL Faith / Spirituality-based Learning City Development Network](#) founded by Maria and Connie, and now led by Maria and Margaret Sutherland from the University of Glasgow. The group, made up of scholars, educators, and urban practitioners from Australia to Taiwan, Israel, Europe and North America, meet monthly on Zoom. Their current work is an action learning and research project on faith / spiritual community responses to COVID-19.

Policy Implications for EcCoWell2 Community Recovery

We make the following recommendations for policy in a pandemic-shaped present, looking towards a sustainable future where the transformative EcCoWell2 learning neighbourhood can continue to play a pivotal role in community resilience and renewal:

1. Integrating the holistic EcCoWell orientation with a prismatic lens of arts, spirituality / faith, embodied knowing and place can in fact foster greater potential for transformative learning for individuals and groups (families, friends, neighbors, colleagues and communities);

2. Local neighbourhood learning can be exponential (formal, informal and nonformal teaching and learning for lifelong impact) when there are opportunities for collaboration and integration across sectors - family, places of worship, public spaces, businesses, cultural and educational institutions;

3. More needs to be done to better understand the connections between leadership, spirituality, and community in learning cities;

4. Building community resilience in the EcCoWell learning neighbourhood can be done by lifting the human spirit - defining purpose, making meaning, and generating connections while addressing the emotive, embodied, spiritual and transformative aspects of what it means to be human.

How do we engage with "a dream deferred"? How can we move from a paradigm of power and privilege to intentional polycentering of priorities as we move forward, prioritizing inclusivity of experience and expression? Faith / spirituality, embodiment and the arts not only sustain the dream through challenges and drought, but also feed the imagination, the vision and content of this dream of equity, justice, and sustainability, which the EcCoWell learning neighbourhood framework can help bring to fruition. We must pay close attention to the nature of place and conditions where the dream may be cultivated, deferred, dry up or explode. How will we respond in policy and practice?

Frank Furedi sums it up well:

> History tells us that disasters do not simply have an impact on physical health, but are also a source of profound moral disorientation. They disrupt the way we think and behave because they call into question the taken-for-granted aspects of daily life. How we manage to deal with the disruptive forces unleashed by a disaster such as COVID-19 ultimately depends on society's ability to give meaning to the experience. (2020)

Do we dare to dream anew?

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[1] "Diversity Divas" is the name of a collaborative inquiry research group adopted for the purposes of group publication. Members of the group include Maria Liu Wong, Naya Mondo, Ramona Sharpe, Aimee Tiu-Wu, Connie Watson and Rosie Williams.

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