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CHAPTER 9

From (Teaching About) Existential Threats to (Teaching) Existential Resilience and Sustainability

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Invited to write on the theme of "Education for Learning and Community Engagement," this poem, "One Story," came to mind. I wrote it while reflecting on my experiences with education—going through Western modern society's educational system.

> As a child, I grew up with strong feelings
> A deep sense of who I am and what is important in life
> I felt one with the world.

The original version of the chapter has been revised. A correction to this chapter can be found at
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Talking to the wind in autumn
Dancing with snowflakes in winter
Listening to flowering in spring
And jumping with grasshoppers in summer
Living and caring were one.

As I became older, culture took over
The stories I heard began to color my life.

I went to school
I learned that adults and experts know—not children
I learned that knowledge is external—not internal.

Kicked out of the world of wonders and wisdom
I started filling my brain with knowledge
To find a new place in the world.

I went through academia
Learned that the truth is complicated
Learned to express myself in complicated ways
Over time, I ceased to understand myself
Hiding under layers and layers of "othering" to feel protected.

At one point, my heart and body became rebellious
My voice refused to repeat others' stories
My thoughts refused to ignore my feelings:
Feelings of partiality, imperfection… of separation
I lost my voice.

Then I saw the separation in the world
How relentlessly we exhaust ourselves
Others and the planet around us
How we seek comfort in material distractions.

Consumerism, injustice, climate change
It's me. It's us. It's one story.

Searching for a new voice is scary
And a strong headwind whirls out there
But if you understand my silence, you may understand my words
Delving into stillness, you may hear my call.

I have been working in the field of sustainability for around 25 years now, in theory and practice. In simple terms, sustainability science, education, and practice are about finding solutions to complex, global challenges that threaten the existence of humanity, other creatures, and the planet, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, and global health pandemics.

These existential threats are generally framed as external to us, and therefore, we try to address them primarily with external, technical measures (Leichenko and O'Brien 2020). This is simply because the way we define problems automatically determines our responses to them.

The narrative is changing now, in that we understand that these threats are a reflection of an inner human crisis, a kind of alienation, an integral element of modern life forms (Berry 2003; Figueres and Rivett-Carnac 2020; Osberg et al. 2024; Rosa 2021; Stibbe 2015; Wamsler and Bristow 2022). Today's interconnected global threats result from our dominant narrative or paradigm of separation, which assumes our thinking mind is separate from our feelings and bodily emotions, that we are all separate from each other, that some humans are superior to others, and that we humans are separate from and superior to the rest of the natural world (Scott et al. 2021).

This situation manifests in our daily lives, where we relentlessly and increasingly exploit and exhaust ourselves, others, and the planet. The acceleration of our pace of life, increasing levels of stress, mental illness, and ecological catastrophe are examples of the same polycrisis (Rosa 2021; Wamsler and Bristow 2022). People have never been this anxious and mental distress is a key obstacle to human development (Helliwell et al. 2024). More people die because of suicide than war, terrorism, natural disasters, and murder together (Our World in Data 2022, 2023; UN 2023; Haines 2024; WHO 2023; Alves et al. 2024). In Europe, one-fifth of all animals are currently in danger of extinction (Davis 2023). 80% of insects are already gone (Davis 2023; Janicki et al. 2022). 90% of big fish are already gone (Christensen et al. 2014; The World Counts, n.d.).

This polycrisis has different names: a crisis of separation, a crisis of disconnection, a crisis of perception, a meaning crisis, a spiritual crisis, or

an existential crisis (Clarke and Mcphie 2014; Ives et al. 2023; Vervaeke and dir 2020).

The question becomes, therefore, *how can we move toward a more caring and thus sustainable society?* This question requires us to ask and address existential questions in research, education, and praxis. In other words: questions about our identity, how we relate and are connected to ourselves, others, and the world.

Accordingly, existential resilience and sustainability also aim to address the inner human dimensions that underlie today's polycrisis, to ultimately increase individual, collective, and planetary wellbeing, regeneration, and flourishing. The human inner dimensions refer to people's individual and collective minds or mindsets, including their beliefs, values, worldviews, and associated inner qualities and capacities (cognitive, emotional, relational) (Wamsler 2020; Wamsler et al. 2020b; 2021). These mindsets are at the root of today's polycrisis because they tend to govern the underlying -isms in our society, such as individualism, dualism, materialism, consumerism, racism, extractivism, etc.

I believe that you, and all other educators, can see close connections to your own work in what I describe here. I would hope that you question and challenge our current understanding of identity and interconnection, of happiness, of living a good life and the ways we want to achieve it through our teaching and community engagement.

Today, we can see the outcome of our modern societies' dominant paradigms and associated values. Related priorities, beliefs, and values are reflected in our everyday lives, our culture, our social norms, education, and the institutional and political systems we have created (Osberg et al. 2024; Wamsler et al. 2022). This means that on the one hand, in modern societies, we are living in very good times: we are probably inhabiting the utopia our grandparents imagined, with modern healthcare, democracy, and human rights for many (Rosling et al. 2018). At the same time, the advancements that we enjoy today also have a downside, an unintended side effect: we are seeing ecological catastrophe, mental health crises, wealth inequality, and political turmoil at unprecedented levels (Suzman 2017).

Our universities and educational systems are part of this picture, a cause, a driver, and a place where resultant impacts become highly visible. We see an increasing number of students who have lost hope and belief in their own agency (Hickman et al. 2021; Ogunbode et al. 2022; Wamsler

2019; Wamsler et al. 2024; Wullenkord and Ojala 2023). We have systematically stripped away the role of inner qualities and capacities such as presence, self-reflection, care, and compassion, in education, institutional, and political systems (Wamsler and Bristow 2022).

If we trace the roots of today's sustainability crises through a culturally entrenched story of separation, we can clearly see the potential role of inner dimension capacities in creating transformation (Uhl 2003; Wamsler 2018; Wamsler et al. 2018; Wamsler and Bristow 2022). These affordances entail an exploration of how we relate–to ourselves, others and the world at large–in reflective, meaningful, ethical and responsible ways (Rifkin 2009). And this exploration nurtures and gives rise to what I call *active hope*, or a mature expression of hope, one that includes the aspiration to manifest our full potential, trust that this is possible, and an energy that is engaged in serving this unfolding (for individual, collective, and planetary regeneration and wellbeing).

Simply providing more information about today's polycrisis, more facts and figures, will not make any difference! In the preface to his book *About this Life: Journeys on the Threshold of Memory*, the late naturalist Barry Lopez (1999) advised the mother of a young, aspiring writer, "If she wishes to write well, she will have to become someone. She will have to discover her beliefs, and then speak to us from within those beliefs. If her prose doesn't come out of her belief, whatever that proves to be, she will only be passing along information, of which we are in no great need."

Similarly, in the context of education, we must discover our beliefs and explore how they relate to our (unsustainable) behaviors, mindsets, cultural norms, systems, and structures so we can adequately respond, resist or adjust if necessary. This requires transformational learning (Mezirow 2018) to adapt, understand, and, ultimately, address the root causes, symptoms, and impacts. Such learning involves practice-based, social, emotional, creative, and ethical components that can nurture transformational capacities, which can be clustered under the headings of awareness, insight, connection, purpose, and agency (Wamsler et al. 2021). Contemplative, nature- and arts-based approaches and storytelling provide powerful paths for transformational learning (Wamsler et al. 2022a). But nurturing certain inner capacities, is unfortunately not enough. Transformation can only be achieved if we systematically support integrated measures that link inner and outer dimensions of sustainability across all scales—at the individual, the collective, and the system levels (Ives et al. 2023; Wamsler 2018; Wamsler et al. 2021).

Measures at individual and collective levels involve linking "outer" approaches with activities that can help us tap into our inner potential, help us discover our personal thinking and internalized cultural messages of separation, superiority, and instrumentalization, develop alternative approaches, and create fields of change (Ives et al. 2023; Wamsler et al. 2021). This can take the form of creating related educational opportunities, working environments, networks, communities of practice, exhibitions, or festivals to balance our cognitive and empirical knowledge, for instance, of nature, with our pleasure in nature's beauty (Wamsler et al. 2022a). Empiricism is only vicious when it is deployed as the only way to understand and dominate the forces of nature or tell just one side of the story of nature's meaning (Brusslan 2020). Balancing our empirical knowledge is thus crucial.

Measures at the system level aim to mainstream and institutionalize the consideration of inner dimensions of transformation into existing institutional and political structures to foster more integrative approaches across all levels (Ives et al. 2023; Wamsler et al. 2021; Wamsler et al. 2020a). This entails, for instance, modifying organizations' vision statements, policies, regulations, and working structures, and their tools for project management, resource allocation, communication, monitoring, and evaluation. A concrete example would be to change communication structures and mechanisms by moving away from the common meta-messages that promote feelings of powerlessness and anxiety toward communicating a new theory of change that supports agency and hope and recognizes that inner development, collective and systems change are never separate, but are co-created.

From an ethical standpoint, it is crucial to highlight that the work across these three levels does not demand that we fix other people's views. This would turn people into objects to be changed rather than seeing them as agents of change (Bentz et al. 2022; Leichenko and O'Brien 2020). Instead, it is about creating integrative measures, spaces, structures, and conditions that can nurture a culture of inner development, mutual support, and engagement from a place of shared, universal values and interconnection to ultimately rattle unsustainable norms and systems (Ives et al. 2023; Sharma 2017; Wamsler et al. 2021.

It is thus vital to shift the conversation and undertake a critical analysis of the potential benefits of attending to inner dimensions and transformation. We must also consider their limits, what they are not, and how we can provide understanding and action that supports more integrative

approaches that cut across the individual, collective, and system levels (see Earthrise Commons; earthrisecommons.org).

As a growing number of courses on sustainability and transformation are offered to diverse audiences in and outside academia, it is time to critically re-assess their potential to contribute to sustainability outcomes across different scales. Work conducted in the context of our Contemplative Sustainable Futures Program has addressed this gap. Related studies have looked into programs that aim to integrate inner and outer dimensions of change, nourish inner development to support culture and system change, and accelerate work toward the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).[1]

On the basis of our results, we identified the key elements that such education programs require to become vehicles for transformation across individual, collective, and system levels (Wamsler et al. 2023). We can steward this change by adapting and combining inner development methods in ways that support participants as they challenge current unsustainable social paradigms and understand how they can systematically co-integrate the human dimension of sustainability within existing cultures, mechanisms, and structures. These key elements are:

- **Context and understanding**: how we see the world

  Provide a comprehensive understanding of the entangled nature of today's sustainability crises in a complex. We need to understand that today's sustainability problems are deeply connected and always changing, and that we are part of those systems. This means examining how our thinking and our actions affect sustainability. (Figs. 9.1 and 2). Related transformative capacities of educators and learners are, for instance, interdependency, complexity, and systems thinking.
- **Learning approach**: how we learn

  Cultivate transformative spaces and integrative methods for exploring inner dimensions and nurturing transformative capacities on a continuous basis. Related transformative capacities of educators and learners are, for instance, presence, self-reflection, perspective-taking, and compassion.

[1] For an overview of related studies, please see: www.contemplative-sustainable-futures.com/general-3-1

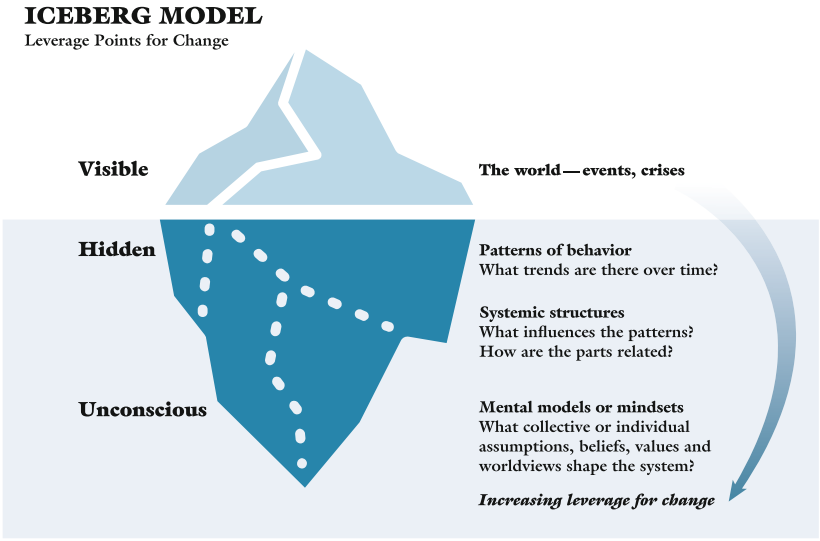

Fig. 9.1 Iceberg model. Adapted from Meadows (1999). Iceberg credit: CC-BY 3.0, Created by Michael Appleford, the Noun Project

- **Practical guidance and solutions**: how we engage

  Give practical guidance on how to design and implement measures that link inner and outer dimensions across individual, cultural, and systems change. Related transformational capacities of educators and learners are, for instance, emotional regulation, sense of agency, co-creation, creativity, active hope, and courage to act.
- **Quality assurance: how we ensure quality and ethics considerations across all aspects**

  Ensure quality education through the explicit consideration of ethics, the role of facilitators, and adequate monitoring and evaluation. Related transformational capacities of educators and learners are, for instance, humility, intrinsic value orientation, and equitable thinking (Fig. 9.3).

Together, these four essential pieces, or key ingredients, support individual, collective, and by extension, planetary wellbeing and flourishing by

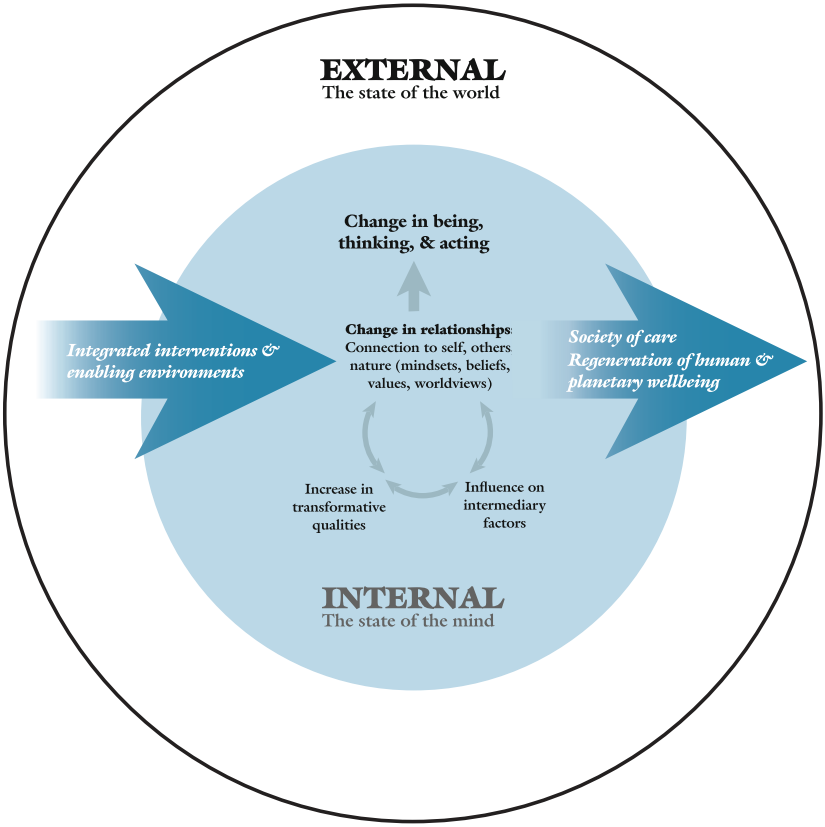

Fig. 9.2 Inner-outer transformation model. Adapted from Wamsler et al. (2021)

covering all key aspects of inner-outer transformation (ontology, epistemology, praxis, ethics). Self-awareness, personal growth, and the capacity for love and service on behalf of the common good become the ultimate goals (Uhl 2011, Fig. 9.4).

Applying and, at the same time, advancing knowledge on the complex intersection between sustainability, inner development, and transformation must become an integral part of our education and related cultures, mechanisms, and structures. As scholars, researchers, and educators, we have a choice of how we position our work with respect to dominant,

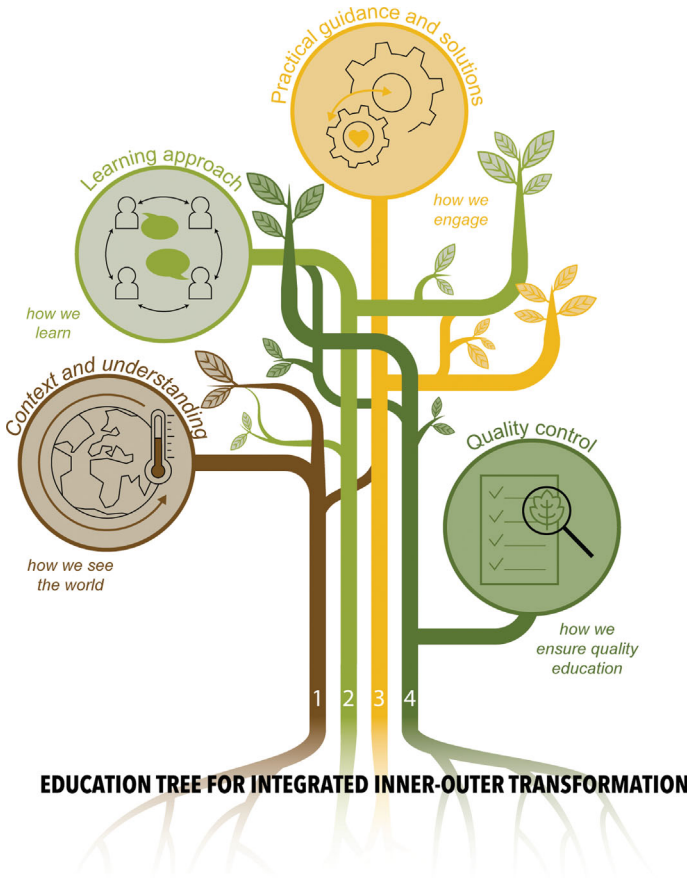

Fig. 9.3 Educational tree: four key ingredients for holistic learning and understanding to accelerate sustainability transformation. Adapted from Wamsler et al. (2023)

unsustainable institutional norms, growing resistance to these norms, and more integrative approaches—even if this means throwing ourselves into the humility of Not Knowing.

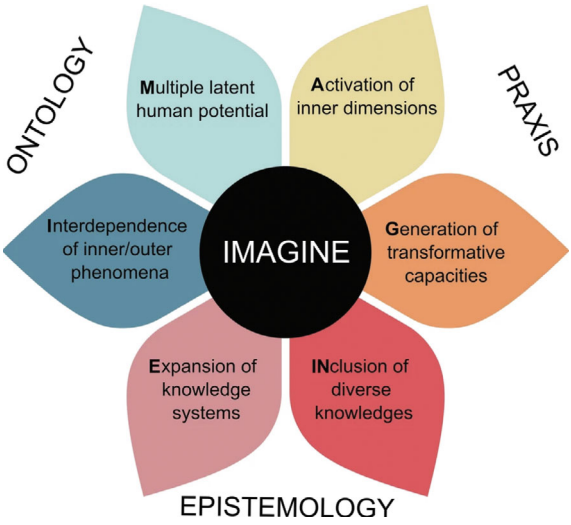

Fig. 9.4 Imagine framework: key contributions of the emerging field of inner-outer transformation for sustainability. Adapted from Ives et al. (2023)

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