

TALK

Academies of hope: Making radical hope a reality

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ABSTRACT

This article, based on a talk given to The First International Online Seminar on the Person-Centred Approach, October 10–11, 2021, has three main aims. Firstly, to remind us of Rogers' indefatigable commitment to cultural transformation, humanisation, and peace. I suggest that these are defining aspects of the origin story of the person-centred approach (PCA), which in recent decades has retreated from this focus in favour of increased attention to person-centred and experiential psychotherapies as methods of psychotherapy and counselling. Secondly, I describe how this cultural transformation project is still at work in the 21st century, showing up in a wide range of transformative initiatives which extend the basic ideas embedded in a person-centred philosophy into what some identify as an emerging counterculture. Thirdly, I urge the PCA community to revisit and re-engage the social transformation agenda at the heart of the approach, to collaborate and organise 'academies of hope', and to become advocates and activists for the creation of life-centred cultures before it is too late.

KEYWORDS: emergent process; existential threat; life-centred culture; person of tomorrow; prophetic imagination; transformative change

PREFACE: CONFRONTING THE EXISTENTIAL EDGE

This might be the most difficult presentation I have ever written. There are two reasons for this. The first is personal: I am preparing a presentation that I know I am unlikely to be able to deliver myself. Since last July (2020) I have been suffering from a difficulty with my speech. I have been doing speech therapy and I had hoped that by now my voice would have returned, at least enough that I would be confident enough to deliver these remarks in my own voice so I could connect heart-to-heart with my feelings as well as ideas. Alas, I have reluctantly come to the decision that it will work better to have someone else read the remarks while I sit alongside. I will watch the chat and reply there. My colleague and friend Professor Marcia Tassinari will facilitate the translation. Facing this new limitation has been—and still is—very hard for me. It has required a profound confrontation with the existential realities of being human, in a human body that either slowly or rapidly will one day cease to be. I have had to accept that there are limits in life not of my choosing, and death and decline are as human as birth and growth. It has also brought into clear focus what a miracle it is that all the elements of a living body usually work together without our attention.

The second reason is both personal and collective. We have all lived through a monstrous plague—COVID-19—that has killed and is still killing millions and destroyed the lives of millions more, and it is still far from over. It is a powerful reminder that this is the human condition for all of us. Life is uncertain; things change; we are not in control; and we must work within limits. However, at the same time, I realise that I am not powerless. Even within these uncertainties and new limits, there are yet boundaries to be explored; choices to be made; and opportunities to make a difference remain. Being is always becoming.

GROWING THROUGH CONNECTIONS

So, this presentation is an important pathway to regaining my sense of agency and more importantly my sense of connection to you—my community. I have received an enormous amount of love and support and it makes a big difference. With your encouragement, I realise that though I may have lost my previously fluent speech, I have not lost my voice; so, whether reflecting, speaking, or writing, I am still in the growth process, still learning, and still trying to make a difference.

CONFRONTING HUMANITY'S EXISTENTIAL EDGE

This Seminar was convened to consider what the person-centred approach (PCA) might have to offer in a post-COVID-19 world. I think we all expected that by now we would be past the worst of the crisis; sadly, this is not the case and, as we meet here thanks to Zoom technology, people all over the world are still suffering and dying. At the same time, fires are burning down the West Coast of the United States, forcing whole towns to evacuate, and there are

riots in the street in major cities around the world. Countless people are out of work and starvation is rampant. It is a nightmare scenario; people are grieving, and they are afraid. Additionally, this set of catastrophic events descends on a world already trying to cope with several other looming threats to planetary survival. We know the story and it's terrifying.

I don't know about you, but after decades of being carried along by the deep river of hope that is at the core of the person-centred approach (PCA) and this global PCA community, it gets more and more difficult for me to remain in touch with the radical hope contained in the idea of an actualising tendency. When every day I see the patterns of chaos, anger, violence, inhumanity, environmental devastation, suffering, and rising despair, this faith is challenged, and I wonder if it is naïve to hope for a better future or to imagine that anything I or we do can make any difference.

However, if I really believed that, I wouldn't be here, would I? I agreed to share these ideas here today because I am convinced that the core message of Rogers' work is more relevant today than it has ever been, and to urge all of us to think about ways we can extend our work into a far wider sphere—a world that is at an inflection point. With this in mind, this discussion has three main aims. Firstly, to remind us of Rogers' indefatigable commitment to cultural transformation, humanisation, and peace. I propose that these meta-level commitments are defining aspects of the origin story of the PCA, but in recent decades many of its proponents have retreated from this focus in favour of increased attention to person-centred and experiential psychotherapies as methods of psychotherapy and counselling. Secondly, I describe how this cultural transformation project is still at work in the 21st century, showing up in a wide range of transformative initiatives which extend the basic ideas embedded in person-centred philosophy into what some identify as an emerging counterculture. Thirdly, I urge the PCA community to revisit and re-engage the social transformation agenda at the heart of the approach, to collaborate and organise 'academies of hope', and to become advocates and activists for the creation of life-centred cultures before it is too late.

PERSONS OF TOMORROW

Many people, including himself (Rogers & Russell, 2002), have described Carl Rogers as a 'quiet revolutionary'. I think a more apt description would be 'prophet'. Rogers had what the theologian Walter Brueggemann (2001) called a 'prophetic imagination'. He saw the injustices in the world, offered a vision of a better way of being, and gave counsel on what we might do to make it reality. Like all prophets, he heard the voices and movements that most don't hear. Working in many different spheres, he listened deeply to the sounds of a world undergoing massive changes and, instead of focusing on what many of his peers thought of as cultural decline, he saw the promise of a new world that was underpinned by a shift in our ways of thinking and new ways of acting. He wanted his work to provide a pathway to that new world (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Rogers the prophet*

Rogers was not naïve. He was a utopian in an era of cynical manipulators. Despite his admitted fear that in the near term, humanity had major challenges to face and may well be heading for what he called a 'new dark age' (1980, p. 329), he nevertheless believed that radical hope was still justified.

The PCA was always intended as more than a method of psychotherapy. Like many of his humanistic peers, Rogers was offering a new philosophical paradigm or conceptual framework that would inevitably change the world to make it more aligned with an actualising tendency that he believed animated the universe.

Reviewing the radical changes that had taken place in his lifetime, which spanned much of the 20th century, Rogers came to believe that a dramatic cultural shift was already under way—not only in the external world but in the inner world of the human psyche. This was not just a change within the existing dominant conceptual paradigm of the Western world, but was a deep transformation in the basic assumptions upon which Western civilisation had been based for centuries. This shift was changing not just what we do but how we understand ourselves, the world, each other, and the future.

Rogers and the other founders of humanistic psychology had seen two global wars, the Nazi holocaust, and nuclear devastation and believed that humanity would not survive if it did not change its ways of thinking and acting. However, Rogers went further. He believed that along with changing the world, we would have to change ourselves.

Every society has its own view of what it means to be a 'person' and these views vary greatly across time and across cultures. When a culture changes, so does its concept of personhood.

ANXIETY ABOUT CULTURAL CHANGE

In 1969, in a commencement address to graduating students at Sonoma State University, and returned to again in his final book, *A Way of Being*, in 1980, Rogers speculated about the impact of a radically changing world, on psychological reality, and our concept of what it means by personhood. He wondered out loud what should we expect of 'persons of tomorrow'. Change at the level of a culture inevitably creates instability and uncertainty. Many regarded the cultural unravelling of the 1960s with extreme anxiety—fears of social upheaval, loosening social mores, political dissent, loss of social control. However, true to his life-long emphasis on growth rather than pathology, Rogers focused on the creative and emancipatory possibilities this counter-cultural loosening presented. Though then, as now, reactionary forces resisted these movements, sometimes with violence, Rogers heard hope in the voices and choices of those he met at workshops and in encounter groups. He saw a new generation seeking radically new ways of being as they responded to the challenges and uncertainties of their times. It was this prophetic sense of radical hope, of the future as radically open, of reality not as something fixed and eternal but as an evolving story for which we are all responsible that first drew me to the PCA and still guides my work.

POWERFUL TIMES

I think it is fair to say that the world has not gotten less turbulent in the last 50 years. On the contrary, it has become more chaotic and incoherent, and people are far less optimistic than they were a generation ago, prompting apocalyptic imagery. Even before COVID-19, humanity was already facing a cascade of interlocking crises that pose an existential threat to human survival. In many leadership circles, the situation is coming to be called a 'VUCA world'—volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous—with multiple levels of crisis going on at the same time.

In an inquiry with colleagues in the International Futures Forum, we identify four different levels at which a VUCA world affects us.

The visible level

There is the 'visible' crisis, which we see all around us every day—intensified now by the COVID-19 pandemic and the vicious invasion by the Russian Federation of sovereign Ukraine. Communities are crumbling. Nothing works anymore. The systems and institutions we used

to take for granted for a stable society are failing across the globe. There is rising inequality, racial strife, millions of refugees, global crime, rising authoritarianism, and decay of the rule of law. The list is familiar, daunting, and gets longer every day. People can be forgiven for feeling helpless.

The conceptual level

Complicating this further is a 'conceptual' crisis. Core assumptions about reality are no longer fixed. Conceptual maps don't fit the world we now live in. It is too complex for reductionist and rationalist models. Ten minutes on Facebook will show you that there is no longer a reliable source of authority to turn to—science or religion—which everyone will trust. Scientific knowledge has become weaponised and is no longer trusted. People argue about COVID-19, masks, climate data, conspiracies. There is no shared narrative that the majority agree with.

Why should they? The information load is so overwhelming (sometimes described as 'drinking from the fire hose') that there is little chance any of us will ever know more than one small piece of the truth. We can no longer safely distinguish 'fact' from 'deep fake' or manipulated reality. We must make our way with only fragments and do the best we can. Whether we like it or not, things do not get better with more information, they get worse. This creates cognitive dissonance on a societal level.

The social/cultural level

This leads to a 'cultural' crisis: Humans cannot tolerate a VUCA world for long. Eventually, they will move to reduce the complexity and impose some patterning. One of the most common ways is to look for others who see the world the same way and separate themselves from those who challenge their truths. Creating homogeneous subcultures of like-minded people—'us and them'—is now remarkably easy, thanks to social media. Gradually, cultures disintegrate, and social solidarity evaporates. It is a small step from here to 'us'—who are virtuous—versus 'them'—who are evil.

The existential level

Therefore, we find ourselves in an 'existential' crisis: Disruptions of this magnitude strike at the heart of our frameworks for reality. We lose our centre. What does it mean to be a person in this world? Who am I? Who are 'we'? What am I worth? What anchors my identity, my morality, my sense of purpose, my understanding of what we owe each other? What are my rights? What are yours? What do we owe other living beings, the planet, the future? In the current upheaval, the very definition of what we mean personally and collectively by the idea of 'person' must be reconsidered. Though there have been civilisational shifts before, this is

the first time in human history in which the survival of the planet is also uncertain. We are destroying the planet we live on. We are in a new world and we have few guideposts to help us travel.

If we are to survive these powerful times and learn to live fully human lives, we will need to learn our way forward into a new kind of consciousness. One that is advanced enough to operate in the new VUCA circumstances we have created. Person-centred practice provides a process for moving beyond the levels that create these crises. More on that later.

We know this can be done because our ancestors whose worlds we inherit faced similar civilisational disruptions and survived to build better worlds for their children. Now it is our time to respond to these accelerating crises with the kind of growth that changes not just what we do, but changes who we are. We must help people develop their psycho-social capacities and become Rogers' 'persons of tomorrow'.

PERSON-CENTERED APPROACH TREASURE

The good news is that, within the PCA community, there is a great storehouse of collected treasure. We have decades of experience of helping individuals and groups turn crisis into opportunity and to build communities that support human growth and potential. As Rogers the prophet told us in his last book in 1980:

If the time comes when our culture tires of endless homicidal feuds, despairs of the use of force and war as a means of bringing peace, becomes discontent with the half-lives that its members are living—only then will our culture seriously look for alternatives... When that time comes, they will not find a void. They will discover that there are ways of facilitating the resolution of feuds. They will find there are ways of building communities without sacrificing the potential creativity of the person. They will realize that there are ways, already tried out on a small scale, of enhancing learning, of moving towards new values, of raising consciousness to new levels... They will find that there are ways of being that do not involve power over persons and groups. They will discover that harmonious community can be built on the basis of mutual respect and enhanced personal growth... As humanistic psychologists with a person-centred philosophy—we have created working models on a small scale which our culture can use when it is ready. (p. 205)

PUTTING THE PCA TO WORK ON THE LARGER SCALE

The PCA was always intended as an inquiry about more than a method of psychotherapy or counselling. From the outset it was, and for some still is, a mythic project. By that I mean it aimed to alter the world view or cosmology that provides the frameworks for understanding the world and ourselves. By the late 1990s, I was exploring the application of person-centred principles to larger contexts such as feminism (O'Hara, 1996), post-modernism (O'Hara,

1995), and in organisations (O'Hara & Leicester, 2019). I was interested to know if the growth-oriented principles that the PCA community took for granted would apply to a wider public who knew nothing of Rogers' work. Then, in a huge stroke of luck, in 2000 I received an invitation from Graham Leicester in St Andrews, Scotland to join the International Futures Forum (IFF) (<https://www.internationalfuturesforum.com/>), an international non-profit think tank that aimed to find out what it takes to live well in a VUCA world and how can we make a difference even though the barriers to doing so are very high. I was the only psychologist in the group. The others came from traditional disciplines like economics, philosophy, governance, and business. Discussions of psychology and consciousness were new and, frankly, suspect. At first, like true heirs of the Enlightenment, they were suspicious of subjectivity, feelings, and, especially, intuition and were more comfortable with objectivity, models, and abstractions. The word 'consciousness' was too counter-cultural for them. Some members avoided feelings and non-rational ways of knowing, calling them, only partly in jest, 'Californication'. They were more used to trusting quantitative science rather than qualitative and our first conversations were more debate than dialogue. However, at the same time, they were human beings, living in the same turbulence as everyone else. They also wanted to make a positive difference in the world, but they wanted to start with hard evidence. We had in common, though, an openness to the idea that the world's crises were at a level of complexity that was calling for a new world view—a paradigm shift, a change in consciousness.

So, we went looking for evidence by studying places where this cultural shift might already be happening, even in places that were far away from California. We found them—lots of them. We found examples of projects in the United Kingdom, USA, India, Latin America, Africa, and Europe where, despite many barriers, challenges were complex and seemingly insurmountable, transformative learning and cultural change had been achieved. We came to think of these projects as 'academies of hope'.

The projects were diverse and included a large urban renewal project in Falkirk, Scotland; a mutual care project for lonely elders; the creation of self-care Kitbags now used in schools throughout Scotland; a citizens' organisation in a large Indian slum; a US university; a dialogue project in Ireland, as well as arts organisations, the National Health Service, and government agencies.

Our methodology included visiting these projects and listening to the experiences of those involved. Our 'method' was essentially person-centred. It was, as much as possible, to suspend our own frames of reference and immerse ourselves in the world of the others/Others, participating in their work, using their language, metaphors, and stories to indwell in the issues as they experienced them. Like heuristic or phenomenology researchers, we moved away from a subject-object perspective with its expert gaze and instead strived for a subject-subject stance to know the Other as persons through mutual engagement. We listened empathically, opened up to the context, tuned in to group dynamics, shared our own feelings—including our vulnerability and admiration for the work these folks did every day.

We accepted unconditionally that the people living with the problem were the experts not us. We had no shared facilitation methodology to apply and likely would have distrusted anyone who claimed they had, so we met as persons, open to participate and ready to learn. Our job was only to help them and ourselves get a new look at the situation, reflect on what we experienced, and try to access and collect the group wisdom. We set out to make meaning together and, where possible and plausible, imagine new possibilities for action.

Though most of us in the IFF are experienced within our own disciplines, we had no shared theory of transformative change. We did share a values framework and a working hypothesis, however. Though we came from diverse ethnic, national, cultural, religious, and disciplinary cultures, we all trusted the life process and believed that even in extremely deprived circumstances, persons and their communities already possess immense resources for healing, creativity, and growth. We shared a belief that this can be enabled by conditions of respect, psychological safety, freedom of expression, empathic listening, and person-to-person dialogue. Moreover, it can be constrained when these conditions are absent or censured.

An important part of the approach was to closely shadow participants and successful leaders of these organisations on the job, to participate in their process where possible, listening to their ways of being, and being with their colleagues in their settings, trying to understand what made it possible for them to thrive and make a difference.

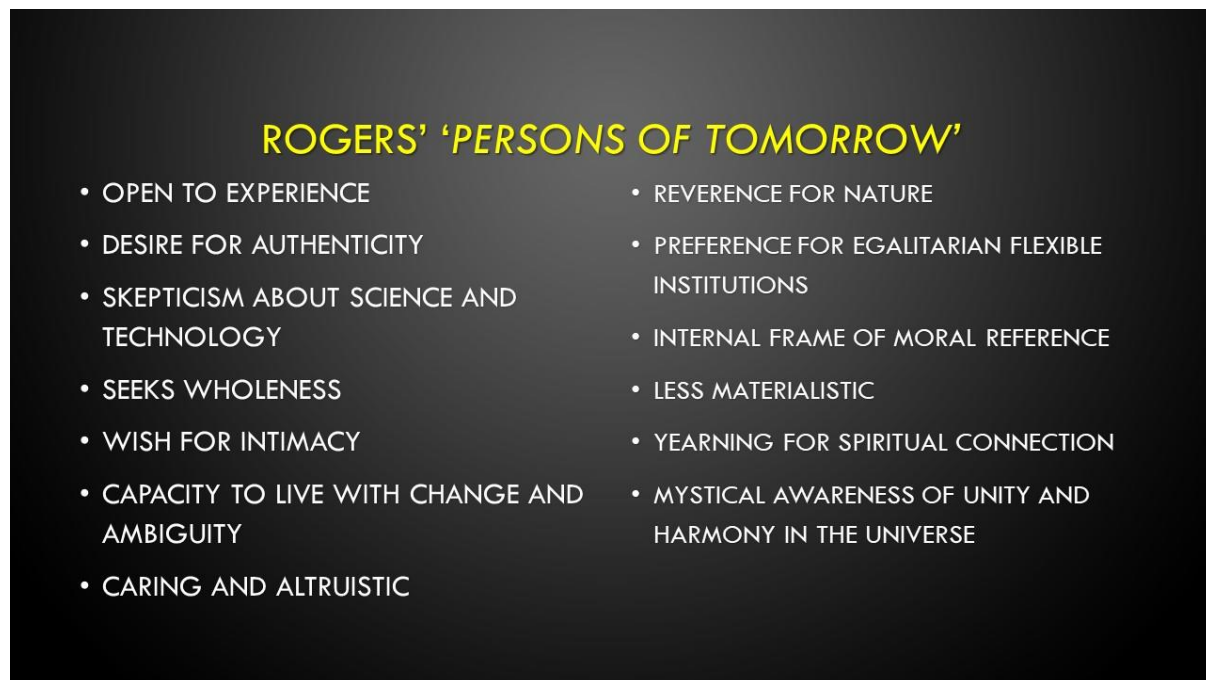
What were the secret ingredients?

We have described these findings in detail in our book *Dancing at the Edge* (O'Hara & Leicester, 2012) but none of it will surprise you. There were two main factors—one developmental and the other, the organisational or community context.

We were impressed over and over, that the people who seemed to be thriving and making a humane difference were more like Rogers' (1980) 'persons of tomorrow' than most of their colleagues and peers (see Figure 2). Their ability to stay sane and be effective was not just a matter of funding, technical expertise, or the right management skills. It was much more a function of their ability to be aware, to connect, adapt, and to respond to their situation, to tolerate complexity with humility, authenticity, and balance. They trusted the inherent potential for transformation in themselves and their co-workers and, above all else, they had faith in the future, even in the most challenging situations.

The other key factor that showed up in contexts as different as the National Health Service, Scotland, and a local community council in Delhi, India, was that they created around them, in their environment, the necessary conditions for their employees, colleagues, clients, and citizens to develop their own higher potentials too. They created settings where everyone was safe to take risks and stretch—learning together how to live in a VUCA world. They created 'academies of hope'.

Figure 2. Rogers' (1980) 'Persons of tomorrow'



GROWING THROUGH THE CRISIS

The good news is that we, in the PCA community, know how to nurture human potential. We have seen on the level of individual clients and the macro level of organisations, cultures, and even civilisations, human beings are learning specialists, and in the right conditions, we expand our capacities and adapt to our new circumstances. We can learn and grow into them.

The capacities needed to thrive in the 21st century are not mechanistic, technical skills that can be applied according to manuals and fixed rules. They are qualities of being of persons as a whole. Becoming a person of tomorrow is not like assembling the parts of a machine. It is difficult to be compassionate, for example, without at the same time showing a capacity for empathy, authenticity, humility, and other qualities. Twenty-first century competencies must be appreciated holistically. Their expression will often seem counter-cultural to a dominant culture that works with abstractions, models, and metrics, and suggests that competencies can be distinguished one from another, developed in isolation, and mastered one stage at a time (O'Hara & Leicester, 2019).

We in the IFF believe, instead, as did Rogers, that these qualities are innate human potentials waiting to emerge. They are present in any human system (individual or collective): they simply require the right enabling conditions, challenging settings, life experiences, and imagination to be called forth and developed through practice. As PCA practitioners, we know those conditions include freedom to be authentic and congruent, acceptance, empathy, psychological security, respect, conceptual coherence, cultural awareness, and

understanding different ways of knowing. These conditions are the heart of the PCA community, encounters, and counselling.

SIGNS OF HOPE

I suggest that despite how dark things seem today, there are many signs of hope. We already see new kinds of persons (many of them young) emerging all around us who are more at home in the new complexity and have greater capacity to be effective in the face of the emergencies we describe. Greta Thunberg may be the most well-known of the young world changers, but she is not alone. Young leaders are at work anywhere there is need. In his bestselling book *Blessed Unrest*, environmental activist Paul Hawken (2007) dubbed it the 'largest movement in the world that nobody saw coming'. At the same time as they are at home in a digital world, this new generation are more likely to experience other cultures and older wisdoms, learn from nature, and, as we saw with the Black Lives Matter movement, seek reconciliation and work for social justice. The internet is awash with groups and communities 'getting stuff done' wherever they can to address the world's challenges and engaging in conversations that combine new forms of science with ancient indigenous frameworks that echo what Rogers heard 60 years ago.

A recent study of over 35,000 social change initiatives world-wide identified the most common key words in their mission statements (see Figure 3). This suggests that the paradigm shift is already gaining strength.

Figure 3. *New value priorities*



So how can this new kind of person—the persons of tomorrow—already in our midst and in ourselves now be encouraged, supported, and put into action to help the world? How can I start an academy of hope?

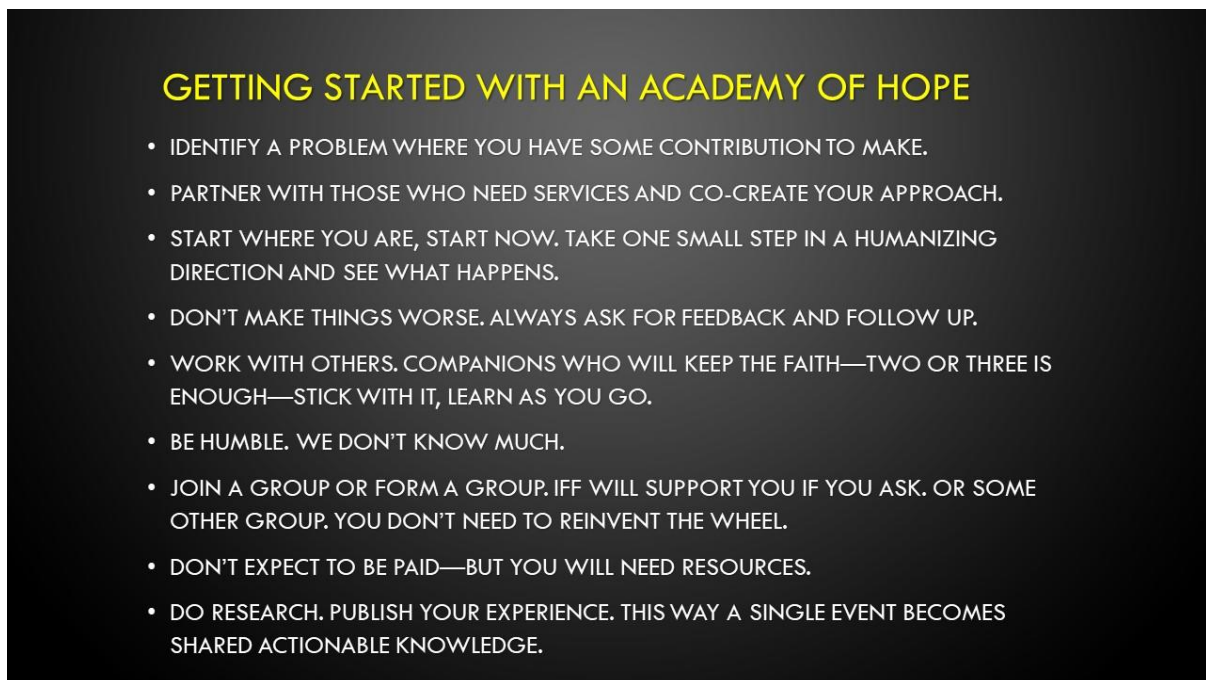
I don't have time here to describe some of the pathways you might choose, for which I refer you to our IFF books, particularly *Transformative Innovation* (Leicester, 2019) and the International Futures Forum website (www.internationalfuturesforum.com) for more ideas; but here are some guidelines for how you might start a project that could become an academy of hope. Most importantly, it doesn't work to create training programmes in a classroom and then send people out to apply what they learned. This is an old paradigm that worked while the world was simple or stable, but not in a VUCA world. In today's fast-moving world, we develop ourselves by taking action—however small—that is designed to create change. We act, we reflect on what happened, we learn, and we grow in an ongoing transformative process. The key ingredients are the need for partners, staying faithful to core principles and flexibility in application, and being open to learning as you go. Be humble, always seek feedback, always stay human (see Figure 4).

It is my deep belief that as the old world crumbles a new world is being born. We must, of course, take care of those who suffer and are casualties of the great transition we are in—including those affected by pandemics or disease and other catastrophes. However, we have bigger work before us. We are called to help a new world give birth to itself.

Whether the world that is being born is a better, more person-centred, and life supporting world, or one degraded and full of suffering, will depend on what we do in the next few years. As California State Senator John Vasconcellos often said, we must become hospice workers for a dying culture and midwives of the new one.

I have great faith in the collective wisdom of this PCA community. I urge us now to turn our attention to this larger task and consciously reframe what we do. Whether you work with individuals in pain, training groups, encounters, writing papers, creating social service agencies, coaching chief executive officers, or are an activist, etc., think of what you are doing in a bigger way. Let us remember the old story of the medieval stone cutter who spent his days cutting stone. One day, his son asked him why he spent all his days chipping at stones. The father replied, 'Son, I'm not chipping stones, I am building a cathedral'.

Over the past decades, the PCA community has been working in a multitude of settings helping individuals and groups learn how to live fully human lives, as persons and as communities. We too have been building a cathedral. It is time for those of us in the world-wide PCA community to remember its activist roots.

Figure 4. Guide to getting started


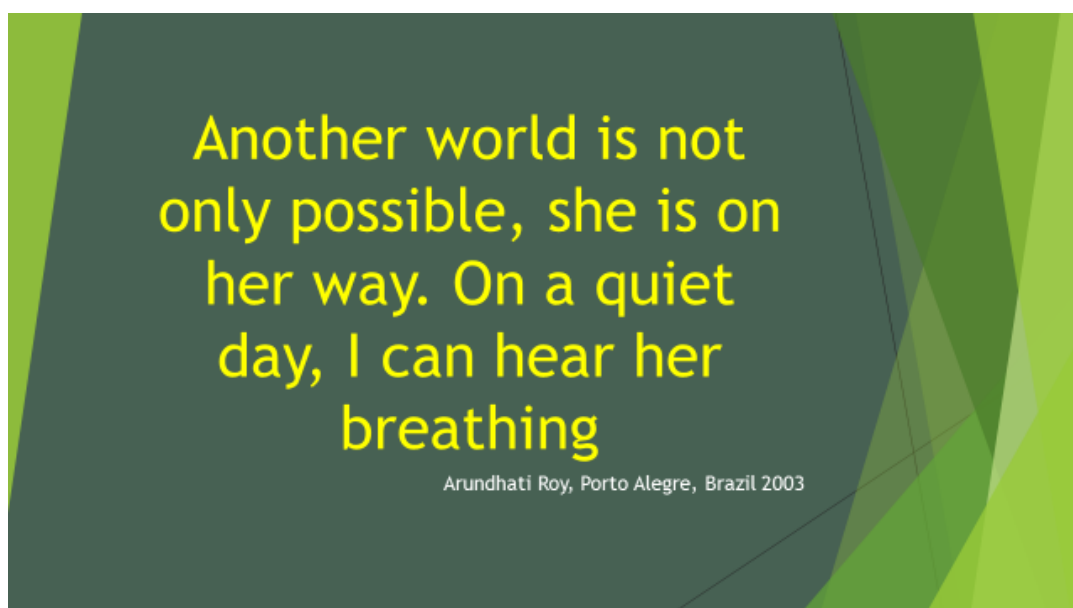
GETTING STARTED WITH AN ACADEMY OF HOPE

- IDENTIFY A PROBLEM WHERE YOU HAVE SOME CONTRIBUTION TO MAKE.
- PARTNER WITH THOSE WHO NEED SERVICES AND CO-CREATE YOUR APPROACH.
- START WHERE YOU ARE, START NOW. TAKE ONE SMALL STEP IN A HUMANIZING DIRECTION AND SEE WHAT HAPPENS.
- DON'T MAKE THINGS WORSE. ALWAYS ASK FOR FEEDBACK AND FOLLOW UP.
- WORK WITH OTHERS. COMPANIONS WHO WILL KEEP THE FAITH—TWO OR THREE IS ENOUGH—STICK WITH IT, LEARN AS YOU GO.
- BE HUMBLE. WE DON'T KNOW MUCH.
- JOIN A GROUP OR FORM A GROUP. IFF WILL SUPPORT YOU IF YOU ASK. OR SOME OTHER GROUP. YOU DON'T NEED TO REINVENT THE WHEEL.
- DON'T EXPECT TO BE PAID—BUT YOU WILL NEED RESOURCES.
- DO RESEARCH. PUBLISH YOUR EXPERIENCE. THIS WAY A SINGLE EVENT BECOMES SHARED ACTIONABLE KNOWLEDGE.

We are called to facilitate the emergence of a new civilisation to replace the one that is dying and to base it in a new paradigm of thought and a new way of being that puts a consciousness of persons and all life at its centre. In 1980, again, Rogers the prophet, said:

The many converging trends ...constitute a paradigm shift. We will try of course to live in our familiar world, just as people lived upon a flat world long after we knew it was round. But as these new ways of conceptualizing the person and the world sink in, becoming increasingly the basis of our thinking and our lives, transformation becomes inevitable. (p. 348)

I will end with my favourite quote from Arundhati Roy from her presentation *Confronting Empire* (Roy, 2003):



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