Developmental spaces for an age of transition

Commonweal & Life Itself

Introduction

Context

There is a deep and growing divide in the US, Europe and potentially elsewhere around critical collective issues (e.g. race, climate etc) at a time when we need action on them. We refer to these as the metacrisis or polycrisis, to reflect their deeply interwoven nature.[1]

At least in part, there is a loss of meaning and belonging as previous sources of these have withered away e.g. spirituality or wider cultural narratives (progress etc), and deeper senses of who we are and how we relate to the world have become lost. This is particularly so for young adults, who are at a critical point in their lives where their sense of place and purpose is forming[2] – and who as the next generation are crucial to driving social change.

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[1] For more, see https://www.commonweal.org/program/resilience/ and https://resilienceproject.ngo

[2] For evidence of the mental health decline in young people more generally see, for example: *The Age of Anxiety? Birth Cohort Change in Anxiety and Neuroticism, 1952-1993,* Jean M. Twenge (2000) https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/11138751/

Finally, we now have substantial evidence that healthy human development is psychological and cultural as well as biological – *and* that such development is neither "automatic", nor rapid: it often needs to be deliberate and intentional and may have gestation periods of months/years for sustained ontological growth.

Challenge

We face a polycrisis where the ability to act collectively and sense-make collectively is crucial. Yet, at this very moment, our cohesiveness and collective sense-making has broken down.

Addressing this requires progression (not regression i.e. to the tribe) and that **progression needs to be at the level of personal and collective "being"** – not just technological or systemic change.[3]

This is especially true for young adults, who will inherit and shape our civilization at a critical juncture. This is a daunting task, requiring psychological and emotional resilience and deep personal and collective growth. Yet, at present, young adults have been exclusively raised and educated in mainstream institutions and culture embedded in the "old" (dysfunctional) paradigm – the very one which has led us to the point of crisis – and have few of the resources or tools to rise to this challenge[4].

Furthermore, ontological growth is complex and hard. No technical "quick fixes" exist, and it involves work in areas such as spirituality which are ignored or even taboo. Most

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[3] See the "Primacy of Being" for a much fuller exposition of this thesis.

[4] To adapt a line from Audre Lorde: "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house". If we are to properly equip young people to lead humanity away from the precipice of collapse, they must be given opportunities to grow and develop in ways not afforded by current mainstream social institutions.

importantly, growth requires more than a single powerful experience – for example, many people go to retreats / transformational programs and have amazing experiences but they often then go back into an old environment and transformation is not sustained.

How to nurture true, sustained growth – for "states to become traits" – is still something of an unknown. Nevertheless, it is likely to require both a longer program more integrated with "everyday life" and an ecosystem extending in both space and time e.g. in the form of a strong cohort or wider support systems such as job and living opportunities which nurture and support ongoing transformation.[5]

Proposal

Vision

We must create new kinds of environments to support deep, sustained multidimensional [ontological] development with a focus on young adults (18-25 years old). This kind of developmental work is central to addressing the multiple challenges of the polycrisis and supporting the evolution of a new socio-cultural paradigm.

We will start with pilot program(s), rigorously collecting learnings and rapidly iterating – the initial pilot is described below. Given our collective lack of knowledge of what works, rapid experimentation and shared learning will be essential.

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[5] See
https://lifeitself.us/2021/10/05/deliberately-developmental-spaces-a-key-to-addressing-the-metacrisis/

We will then want to scale to reach a significant portion of the relevant age group. For example, within the next 20-30 years we want these environments to reach 10% of young adults [18-25] and to experience deep and sustained development within a reasonable period of time e.g. 4-8 months – and with a cost of no more than $10k per participant.

Goal [in a sentence]: create environments such that within 30 years 10% of young adults (18-25 years olds) in the US and Europe experience deep and sustained development within a reasonable period of time [4-8 months] and use no more than $10k per person?

Pilot Outline

The initial pilot program is anticipated to be along the following lines. However, we emphasize that part of the initial work will be research and engagement exercise to refine and develop this outline.
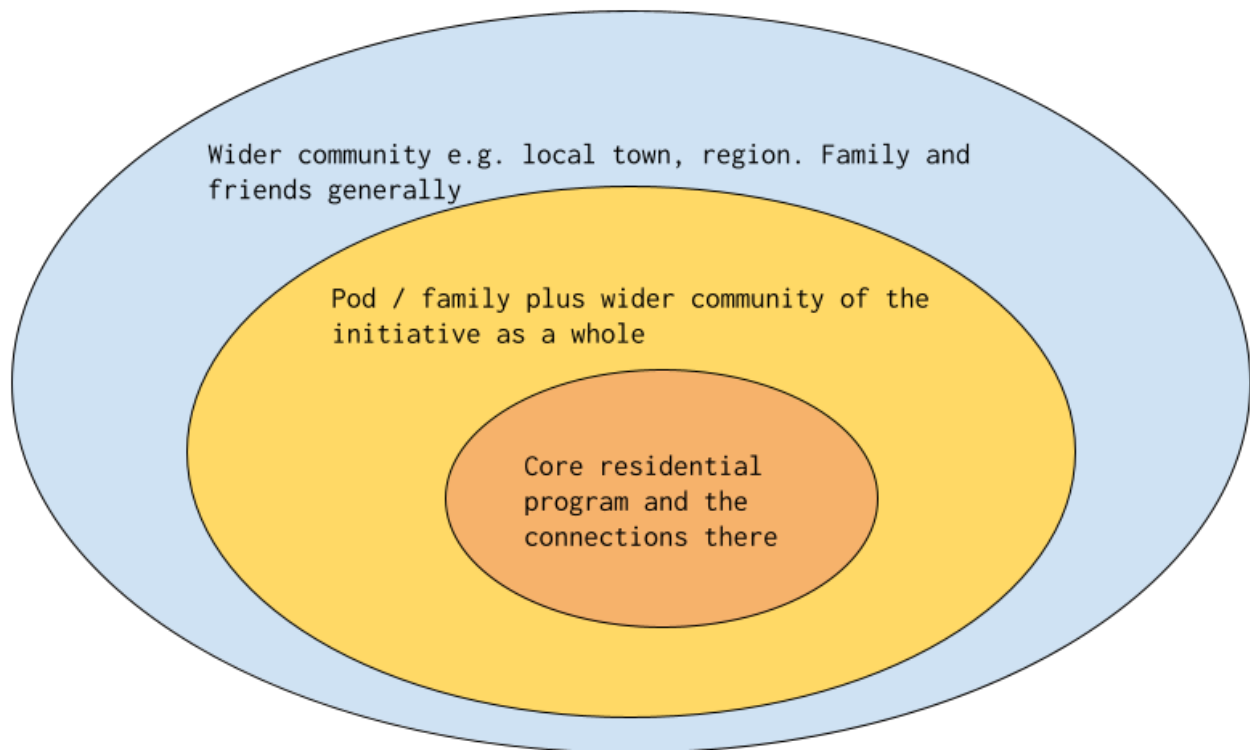
- A medium length (e.g. 4-8 months) core residential program which combines intensive programmatic personal and group development work with general skills training (e.g. programming, communications etc).[6]
- A surrounding support and ongoing development structure that enables sustaining and deepening in the form e.g. of a "pod/family" (6-8 people) with

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[6] We believe this combination is valuable as it means the programs will deliver immediate "marketplace" value in the form of both hard and soft skills. This resonates with the 19th century case study of the nordic "folk schools" presented in the Nordic Secret (Andersen and Björkman, 2017) where young Danish adults from agricultural communities attended the fee-charging schools and learnt both better agricultural techniques (possibly the ostensible reason for participation) as well as broader socio-emotional upskilling to become Danish "citizens".

regular check-ins etc as well as wider community of program participants in general.

- A trajectory post core program into jobs, living, service that are aligned/compatible/supportive of ongoing evolution.

Finally, we plan to incorporate rigorous monitoring and evaluation so that we can rapidly learn and build an evidence base for further efforts (this is area with little systematic knowledge or evidence, at present).

Wider community e.g. local town, region. Family and friends generally

Pod / family plus wider community of the initiative as a whole

Core residential program and the connections there

We plan to pilot this initially in the US and Europe. We would start in the next two years, running for three to five years.

Resourcing

For initial development and trialling we will need external funding. However, in the medium term we seek to become financially self-sustaining (though external support may still be important to widen access through scholarships etc). In particular, we believe that there is a demand for this kind of program – we take inspiration from examples such as coding bootcamps and other forms of continuing or alternative education which have flourished in recent years.

Scaling

If successful, we will identify localities or regions where this could be integrated into wider social systems or programs (e.g. become part of local education systems, or an alternative to, say, military service or similar to Teach for America).

FAQs

What is deep, sustained development? Aka ontological growth?

We are all clear that children develop in substantial ways: not just physically but mentally. There is now substantial evidence that adults can continue to develop in multiple dimensions of their being – cognitively, emotionally, and even spiritually.

We use the term "being" (and ontological) rather than, say, psyche/psychology or consciousness because we think it better captures the entire spectrum from body to mind to spirit! (We want to avoid e.g. "mind/body" divisions that are often implicit when we talk about psychological development – much cognition is embodied etc). This is also the depth we refer to in "deep, sustained development".

What is <u>sustained</u> growth?

Sustained: states => traits. For example, a child when learning to stand may have first moments of a second or two. But this would not be sustained growth: that would be when they are consistently able to stand.

What is multidimensional (growth)?

Multidimensional = i.e. addressing multiple dimensions of our "being" e.g. cognitive, psycho-emotional, spiritual etc.

Why Young Adults?

We would like to develop programs for multiple audiences from children and youth through to octogenarians. However, at this time, we have identified young adults as the most important target demographic. This is for a few reasons.

First, they are the generation that will likely have the largest impact on the future of our civilization. Second, they are able to attend programmes through independent choice (avoiding conflicts with traditional institutions such as parenting, family and schools). Third, they are at an important developmental juncture in their own lives such that interventions are likely to be highly impactful for them.

Why 10%?

Ultimately, these spaces will be accessible to all – most likely via integration into mainstream culture and institutions. However, for this project we are focused on a small but significant minority for a few reasons.

First, given the urgent need for paradigm shift, it is important we focus on the minimum requirements necessary to bring this about. There is good evidence that a small but significant minority can then have cascading effects which shift broader society. We are confident that 10% or a similar proportion of young adults engaging directly will in turn be able to affect a sufficient number of peers and other contacts such that a critical mass can be reached for social transformation[7].

Relatedly, engaging around 10% of young adults appears attainable *even without accompanying wider systemic change*. In other words, we would not have to rely on shifts in government policy or other social institutions and conventions to reach this number of people, preventing our impact being hamstrung by broader systemic inertia.

[7] See for example: *Experimental evidence for tipping points in social convention,* Centola et al (2018)
 https://www.science.org/doi/abs/10.1126/science.aas8827