Developmental Spaces for an Age of Transition

Inner capacities are critical to addressing our escalating crises and cultivate a flourishing future

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Summary

We face a metacrisis that has deep roots in our neglected cultural and inner dimensions. Our ability to act and sense-make collectively is imperiled. Inner development is crucial to addressing this yet hard to do.

We advocate the creation of new kinds of environments to support deep, sustained multidimensional inner development. This developmental work is central to addressing the multiple challenges of the metacrisis and supporting the evolution of a new socio-cultural paradigm – a paradigm able to support sense-making and collaboration at the levels and scale required for flourishing planetary civilization.

We term these environments "developmental spaces" or "conscious collective spaces" to reflect their nature and purpose.

Introduction

Context: we face a metacrisis that has deep roots in our neglected cultural and inner dimensions

There is a deep and growing divide in the US, Europe and potentially elsewhere around critical collective issues (e.g. climate, democracy, race 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, this is connected to a loss of meaning and belonging: previous sources of these have withered away e.g. spirituality or wider cultural narratives (progress, solidarity 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.

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 inner development.

Challenge: our ability to act and sense-make collectively is imperiled; inner development is crucial to addressing this and is hard to do

We face a polycrisis and metacrisis 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.

[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/

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 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]

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[3] See "What is Development" in the Appendix for more on personal and collective being and the "Primacy of Being" for a much fuller exposition of the general 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.
[5] See https://lifeitself.us/2021/10/05/deliberately-developmental-spaces-a-key-to-addressing-the-metacrisis/

Vision

We envision the creation of new kinds of "developmental spaces" to support deep, sustained multidimensional inner development. This developmental work is central to addressing the multiple challenges of the metacrisis and supporting the evolution of a new socio-cultural paradigm – a paradigm able to support sense-making and collaboration at the levels and scale required for planetary civilization.

Our long-term aspiration is within the next 30 years to reach at least 10% of key populations (e.g. subregions) within the US and Europe (and elsewhere).[6]

Ultimately, these programs are for all ages from children to octogenarians. However, at this time, we believe youth and young adults (18-35) 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.

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

Longer term e.g. 10-30 years, we would 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 and to experience deep and sustained

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[6] See "Why 10%" in appendix for more on that figure. Our focus on the US and Europe is a reflection of where the authors have expertise and presence, not any reflection on priority or importance.

development within a reasonable period of time e.g. 4-8 months – and with a reasonable cost per participant.

How do we begin?

We propose beginning with a piloting of the approach over a period of 3-5 years. The aim would be to create the environment and run the program with a small set of participants e.g. 100 in the first year or two and 1000 by the end of 5 years.

Laying the Foundations

The first activity would be to lay sound foundations for this effort by distilling existing research and practice. This could also include reviewing existing programs through the lens of modern developmental models.

The second activity would be engaging with existing experts and stakeholders. The goal would be to deepen the awareness of this work and find pathways for practice and implementation.

Programmatic survey of the field

First, we want to look at the theory and evidence on dimensions and stages of *development itself* with a focus on later stages more relevant to adults. Second, theory, evidence and practices for *nurturing* development. For example:

- How does development happen? What are the key conditions and causes (and blockers)? What is known and not known? What turns states into traits?
- What existing programs are there focused on this age group and how does their work appear from a developmental perspective?
- What practices have support and evidence from science and wisdom traditions? How do they interact to support or negate each other?

This work would combine both desk research and expert interviews.

Stakeholder engagement

The second activity would be engaging with existing experts and stakeholders. The goal would be to deepen the awareness of this work and find pathways for practice and implementation.
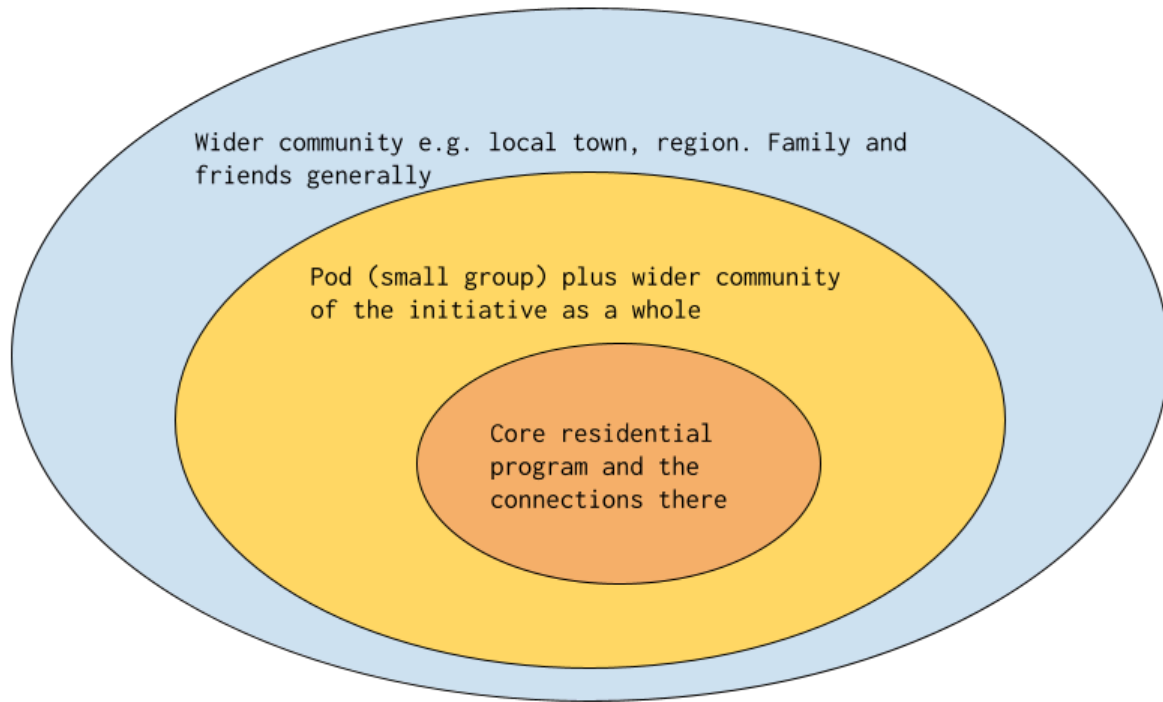
Piloting the Program: Phase I (1-3 years)

Here is an outline of an initial pilot program. We emphasize that the ongoing research and engagement exercise just discussed will refine and develop this outline.

- A medium length (e.g. 3-8 months) core residential program which combines intensive programmatic personal and group development work with general skills training (e.g. programming, communications etc).[7]
- 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 regular check-ins etc as well as wider community of program participants in general.
- A trajectory post core program into jobs, living and service that is aligned, compatible and 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 an area with little systematic knowledge or evidence, at present).

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[7] 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".

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.

For initial development and trialing 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.

Phase II (3-6 years)

This would be scaling out the program into a more repeatable form. In addition, we would incorporate learnings and feedback from the first phase. The aim is to have at least a thousand participants (five hundred a year).

Phase III (6-15 years)

This would involve substantial further expansion of the program based on the learning in the earlier phases.

FAQs

What is (inner or ontological) development?

We are all clear that children develop in substantial ways: not just physically but cognitively and emotionally. But what about adults? There is now substantial evidence that adults can continue to develop in multiple dimensions of their being – cognitively, emotionally, and even spiritually.[8]

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 also want to avoid the"mind/body" divisions that are often implicit when we talk about psychological development – much cognition is embodied etc.

What is *sustained* development?

Most simply put sustained means going "from states to traits". That is, going beyond having a one-off experience of a capacity or "state" to have this as a capacity that is ongoingly sustained – a "trait".

For example, a child when first learning to stand may only manage this for a few moments of a second or two. This would be a temporary state not a trait, it would not be sustained growth. Sustained growth would be when they are consistently able to stand.

Similarly, we want to nurture sustained adult development. Put most crudely, many of us have had powerful experiences on retreat or at events, yet can find it hard to maintain and integrate those insights once back in our "daily lives".

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[8] A substantial body of research over the last 100 years, starting with James and Baldwin ranging through Piaget to Kegan, Commons and Fischer has indicated the existence of major stages of cognitive and "ego" development.

What is multidimensional development or growth?

Multidimensional means encompassing multiple dimensions of our "being" e.g. cognitive, psycho-emotional, moral, spiritual etc.

What's different here?

Many existing programs or activities from parenting to school clearly involve some form of (inner) development. So what differs about what we are proposing:

- **Integrated:** grounded in a multidimensional ontological development model derived from over a hundred years of science (and thousands of years of wisdom traditions). It is multidimensional in recognizing multiple independent, interacting lines of development e.g. cognitive, psycho-emotional, spiritual etc. It is integrated in that it seeks to address all of these different aspects.
- **Sustained:** nurturing deep and sustained change that integrates into "daily life". More below.
- **Accessible:** designed to be proximate to and integrated with the mainstream – in contrast to, say, monasteries which have provided one kind of sustained developmental program for thousands of years.
- **Intentional/deliberate:** in this program nurturing and supporting personal and collective development is an *explicit* goal and a *central* aspect of the program's design and delivery.
- **Young adult-focused**: to the extent it exists, most developmental oriented work is in school.

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 to 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[9].

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.

[9] 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