Leading from a Sustainable State of Mind:
The Key to Transforming Ourselves and 0ur Institutions

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"The historic role of education has been to provide society with the
capacity to understand, anticipate and respond to the needs of society.
The responsibility of education is no longer just to help understand the world in
which we will live, but also to shape the world in which we want to live."
David Hales, President, Second Nature (1981)

Institutions aspiring to become models of sustainability require leaders who are capable of transforming themselves, and influencing the transformation of their organizations, their communities and the larger society of which they are a part. By transformation, we mean an individual and collective shift of consciousness toward the embrace of the entire universe and all living beings. It is only from that shift of mind that we can help to "shape the world in which we want to live." (Hales, 1981)

Hundreds of institutions across the country and beyond are taking on the challenge of sustainability: incorporating the term into their vision, mission and values statements; adopting campus wide initiatives and practices aimed at conservation and recycling; building LEED certified buildings; adding dedicated courses or programs; creating administrative functions to manage the process; adopting performance measures such as the STARS program; taking an active role in "green" community initiatives; and, founding or joining professional associations including AASHE, ACUPCC, ULSF, Second Nature, HEASC, ISCN and many others.

By and large, these noteworthy efforts fall within the first two levels of what environmental activist and scholar Joanna Macy calls "Three Dimensions of The Great Turning," (Macy, 2009-2012) or a transition from an "industrial growth society" to a "life-sustaining society." These levels or arenas are:

1. Holding actions, to slow destruction—like protesting a dam to save a local river or protesting job discrimination.

2. Creating alternative actions and new infrastructures—institutions, networks and communities—such as sustainable co-ops, community gardens, clean energy sources, etc.
3. Spiritual and cognitive shifts in perception—like speaking a new story of possibility through workshops, art, music and conversations—changing consciousness of how we see the world and ourselves.

It is this third arena – the shift to a sustainable state of mind – that is the most challenging and least frequently addressed in campus initiatives. In fact, in many ways, according to Anthony D. Cortese and Amy Seif Hattan, "the current education system is reinforcing the unhealthy, inequitable, and unsustainable path that society is pursuing. This is not intentional. It is because of deeply held, unconscious beliefs that humans are the dominant species and are separate from the rest of nature, the predominance of disciplinary learning, and an implicit assumption that the Earth will be the gift that keeps on giving, providing resources and assimilating waste and negative impact ad infinitum." (2010)

Another major limiting factor for institutions that seek to become models of sustainability – and one that is founded in the same outmoded world view of which Cortese speaks – is the approach that most institutions take to creating large scale change. Noted educator Stephanie Pace Marshall has described an "old story" of assumptions behind the theory of change generally employed in our institutions, as follows:

- Change is top-down and requires top-level support
- Change requires careful planning and good controls
- Change happens step-by-step in a neat, incremental fashion
- Behavior can be mandated
- Rewards and punishment motivate people to change
- Large-scale changes require large-scale efforts (Wheatley and Friese, 2007)

The new story of change, as articulated by many leading theorists, including the keynote speaker for our conference, Dr. Margaret Wheatley, is the direct opposite of those listed by Dr. Marshall. That new story includes the following:

- Leaders come from anywhere: leaders are those who simply want to help
- Change occurs when leaders step forward to take on what will not let them go

- Change occurs when many small initiatives connect to one another to create an emergent new reality
- Change is messy, chaotic and unpredictable
- People embrace what they create themselves
- There is nothing more powerful than a community that discovers what it cares about

This new story also has an underpinning in the theory of *transformative learning*, which has been embraced by some in the classrooms of educational institutions, but not widely followed by traditional leaders in change initiatives in higher education. This theory, attributed to Jack Mezirow and others, suggests that shifts in deeply held beliefs, assumptions and worldviews occur when we encounter situations or circumstances in which our current ways of thinking, acting and interacting are inadequate. Patricia Cranton, Professor of Adult Education at the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton, Canada, describes what transformative learning theory is, as follows:

> At its core, transformative learning theory is elegantly simple. Through some event, which could be as traumatic as losing a job or as ordinary as an unexpected question, an individual becomes aware of holding a limiting or distorted view. If the individual critically examines this view, opens herself to alternatives, and consequently changes the way she sees things, she has transformed some part of how she makes meaning out of the world. (2002)

Cranton goes on to articulate a process through which transformative learning occurs, as "a rough guide to helping us set up a learning environment to promote transformation," as follows:

1. An activating event that typically exposes a discrepancy between what a person has always assumed to be true and what has just been experienced, heard, or read
2. Articulating assumptions, that is, recognizing underlying assumptions that have been uncritically assimilated and are largely unconscious
3. Critical self-reflection, that is, questioning and examining assumptions in terms of where they came from, the consequences of holding them, and why they are important
4. Being open to alternative viewpoints
5. Engaging in discourse, where evidence is weighed, arguments assessed, alternative perspectives explored, and knowledge constructed by consensus

6. Revising assumptions and perspectives to make them more open and better justified
7. Acting on revisions, behaving, talking, and thinking in a way that is congruent with transformed assumptions or perspectives

My recommendation for employing "new story" methods of change based in transformative learning theory is the use of conversations that matter. These conversations can take many forms from circles to world cafes to simple gatherings or large meetings called by anyone who wants to create the conditions in which a shift of mind becomes possible. In my conference presentation I suggest a set of questions for a simple form of conversation that can be used in any institution or community, as follows:

1. What kind of world do we want our children to live in? (Vision question)
2. What is our role in helping to bring forth such a world? (Purpose question)
3. What are the things we could start to do today that would bring us closer to our vision? (Action question)
4. What commitments can we make to one another about actions we'll take? (Accountability question)
5. How will we stay together and learn from one another? (Community-building conversation)

These conversations and others like them hold the potential for fostering a new sustainable state of mind among participants that can become the basis for new ways of thinking, acting and interacting on our campuses, and among our community members and the larger society. Please consider extending your deep conversations. I began a deep conversation with the person who became my wife more than 30years ago. That conversation with Carole continues up to this moment and surely has resulted in our ongoing learning and transformation. That ongoing learning is what made this paper possible. I cannot think of anything I do alone.

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Professor Schwinn teaches management and leadership. Most recently, he and his wife, Carole, have journeyed to 13 countries in search of managers and leaders who are positively transforming the places in which they work and the broader communities within which they reside. Prior to his career at Lansing Community College, he and his wife spent nearly twenty years as consultants and trainers providing developmental assistance to managers, leaders, organizations, and communities. Prior to that period, he was an engineer and an executive at General Motors and Ford.